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OR,

THE SWEEPSTAKE AT SHOSHONE.

A Romance of the Black Hills Region.

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KING," "PRINCE PRIMROSE, THE FLOWER
OF THE FLOCK," "HUCKLEBERRY,
THE FOOT-HILLS DETECTIVE,"
ETC., ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

A QUEER FIND.

A HEAVILY-LADEN train, drawn by six pairs of strong oxen, crept with measured pace along a narrow defile in the Black Hills. A small dust-cloud, whose upper edges were ragged and wind-blown, floated above the wagon and teams, and along the backward trail, like an up-borne, yellowish banner.

This slow-moving freighter was the advance of the "bull train," on its way to Deadwood,

"JIM! JIM! OH! WHO HAS DONE THIS?" THAT WAS THE CRY THAT ESCAPED THE GRIEF STRICKEN TOM.

from Sidney, Nebraska, the nearest railway point south of the hills.

All the supplies for the entire Black Hills region, in that early day, before the advent of the Elkhorn Valley Railway, were freighted into the hills by "bull trains," either from Sidney, on the Union Pacific, from Pierre, on the Missouri river, (now the capital of South Dakota) or from other equally distant points. Even the heavy machinery needed for saw-mills and for mining enterprises was brought in in this slow and exceedingly expensive way.

As the teams were known as "bull" teams, so the drivers of them were known as "bull-skinner;" and it is with one of these that this story of early Black Hills times has largely to do.

The term "early," however, may be misleading when applied to the Black Hills country, for it has been a region of marvelously quick development. But a few years ago it was a wilderness, known only to the roving Sioux and other hostile Indians; and the completion of the railway, which now links it to the outer world, only dates from some time late in the 'eighties.

The driver who tramped steadily along by the side of the oxen, was a man widely known as Teamster Tom, and whose real name was Thomas Laidlaw. He was a comparatively young man, being probably under thirty years of age, and had been one of the first seekers after the enticing yellow metal, the discovery of which had created such a furor of excitement. He had not met with marked success in his quest for gold, and a stress of hard circumstances had forced him to turn "bull-skinner" for a season.

There was nothing picturesque about his appearance, as he tramped along beside the slow-moving cattle. He was dressed in the ordinary garb of the western mountain-man. A flaming red handkerchief was knotted about his throat, and a big bat served in a measure to protect his already tanned face. The handkerchief and the hat, as also his clothing, were heavily coated with the powdery dust constantly kicked up by the dragging feet of the oxen.

His face, so far as it could be seen through the sweaty dust that half masked its expression, was strongly marked; and the blue eyes that looked out from beneath the wide brim of the hat, were clear and penetrating.

Coiled up under his right arm, with the stock held in the muscular hand, was the heavy, long-lashed whip, (having a silken cracker keen as a biting knife) which gave to these teamsters their designation of "bull-skinner." That whip was a cruel thing in the hands of a merciless man. Skillfully wielded and aimed with angry force, the long-reaching cracker could be made to literally flay the unfortunate animals upon whom it chanced to fall.

The half-listless manner of Teamster Tom suddenly changed, and the blue eyes opened in wide surprise. In glancing along the trail ahead of his teams his gaze had alighted on an unexpected sight. The form of a man lay near the edge of the trail. Apparently the form of a dead man.

The bull-skinner uttered a low exclamation of astonishment; and, quickening his pace into a run, hurried on in advance of the oxen.

There could be no doubt, as he drew nearer, that the man at the side of the trail was dead. The finding of so gruesome an object was not an uncommon thing in those lawless days. Murder and robbery, and all forms of crime, were then rampant and almost wholly unchecked, as well as unpunished. What astonished Teamster Tom was that the body should be so near the trail, where it must be discovered by the first passer. There was only one way to account for this; and that was by supposing the murderer had been frightened away before he could conceal this evidence of his diabolical work. This was taking it for granted that the man had been murdered—under the circumstances the only natural supposition, to the driver.

The tired oxen, no longer urged on, soon came to a halt of their own accord, stopping in the trail a few yards to the rear of their master, who was now bending over the body.

The murdered man was lying on his face, and Teamster Tom, as he pulled the body over to get a view of the features, gave an exclamation of horrified surprise.

"Jim! Jim! Oh who has done this?"

That was the cry that escaped the grief-stricken Tom. There was in it a thrill of anguish, of rage, and of a desire for vengeance that spoke more than volumes.

The slain man was the pard of this bull-skinner, a pard whom Laidlaw had loved with the love of a brother.

There was a bullet wound in the dead man's head, showing plainly how he had come to his death. It had been a cowardly bullet, too, fired from behind; proving the crime to have been murderous assassination.

Jim Ross and Laidlaw, the one dead, and the other now standing above him, filled with a great grief and rage, had come to the hills together. They had been equally unlucky in their search for gold. But when Laidlaw turned to teaming for a livelihood, he had agreed to "grub-stake" Ross, that the latter might continue the hunt for the precious metal.

This had been done; and in a letter, written

by Ross and received by Laidlaw at Sidney, Ross had been able to report wonderful success. He had stumbled on a small "pocket" of nuggets, which he had secured; and in addition reported himself to be following up a "lead," and was soon expecting to strike it rich.

For convenience of carrying, he had traded the nuggets for a diamond, which they were jointly to sell, and the proceeds were to be used in the development of the mine he was so sure of finding.

This was the last word Laidlaw had received from Ross; and of this letter he had been, strangely enough, thinking, while walking beside the oxen along the trail. He had planned to abandon teaming and unite with Ross in working the new mine, if on arriving at Deadwood he should find the dreams of his pard to be verified.

The shock he sustained, therefore, on discovering that the dead man was his pard, Jim Ross, was of a confounding and overwhelming character. Though he saw the dead face before him, he could scarcely believe the thing it witnessed. So far as he knew, Jim Ross had not an enemy in the world. Ross had been a kind-hearted, whole-souled man, a man to make friends rather than foes. It seemed there could have been but one incentive to the commission of so foul a crime; and that was robbery. The possession of the diamond may have been discovered, as well as some extra nuggets and gold dust, which Laidlaw knew Ross to have; and for these he had been slain.

The murder had not long been committed, for the body was still limp and warm; and as Laidlaw gave it another turn to place it in an easier position, the lower jaw dropped in a horrible manner; and there, within the mouth, the diamond lay revealed!

Teamster Tom extracted it with a reproachful twinge, and gazed at it, shudderingly. Its discovery in so singular a hiding-place recalled a statement in Ross's last letter—a statement which he might not have thought of again, but for this. Now it flashed on him with such force that he could have repeated it word for word:

"The diamond will not only be easier to carry than the nuggets, but should I be held up by road-agents (a thing a man is liable to any day in these hills) I can pop the jewel in my mouth for concealment; and if necessary swallow it, as the Jews did in old Jerusalem. I don't think they'd venture to rip fellow up after the wicked fashion adopted by the Roman soldiery. Anyway, I'd risk it; for they'd never think of me hiding such a treasure in my mouth."

The recollection of this paragraph, in conjunction with the finding of the diamond in the dead man's mouth, revealed to Teamster Tom the manner of his pard's death. Ross had been set on by robbers. He had tried to escape by running, and while doing so, had placed the diamond in his mouth. The pursuing villains had shot him in the back of the head; and, as he had fallen forward on his face, the jewel had remained between the jaws, where it had not been discovered. No doubt they had searched his pockets, but had never thought to look in his mouth.

This theory was given additional verification when Teamster Tom, on examination, found Ross's pockets empty. But within an inner pocket of the coat, he found a paper which had been overlooked by the road-agents, if such they were. This paper promised to be more valuable than anything else—than even the diamond itself. It showed that Ross, in following up the "lead," had come on the mine for which he was searching. There was a description of the location of this mine, which was at the base of a hill known as Shoshone Mountain, and of its wonderful richness. It was a gold-bearing quartz vein;—and the written memorandum contained a comment, in diary form, of how it was to be developed by the proceeds to be obtained from the sale of the diamond.

Teamster Tom was well acquainted with the location of Shoshone Mountain; and, as he studied the bit of pencil writing, he believed, from the landmarks and other guides there mentioned, he could go straight to the mine. Even amid his grief and anger, he was not able, nor did he attempt to crowd out the thought that this mine was now his by right of the agreement entered into between himself and his pard. It was his, with whatever of wealth it might hold; provided always that another claimant did not stake it and file upon it before he was given the opportunity. The diamond was his, too; but he did not intend to use it. He would keep it always as a memento—as a gift from his dead friend.

Just now, however, there were other things to think of. First, Ross's body must be conveyed to Deadwood and there be given respectful interment. Then the mine could be looked after. But there was one thing which he resolved should be in his thoughts over and above everything else. That was vengeance on the slayers of Jim Ross. He would ferret out and hunt them down, though it took months and years to accomplish it. He would never rest until this had been done; and should the mine prove as valuable as Ross had believed, he would devote its wealth to this purpose.

Teamster Tom gently bound up the dropped

jaw of his dead pard with the dusty handkerchief taken from his own neck, placed the head in an easy position with his own coat under it, and then walked restlessly back along the trail to look for the coming of the remainder of the wagon train, whose advance was heralded by drifting dust-clouds. There was no danger that his own tired teams would go on until they were ordered so to do.

He chafed with impatience as he took a seat on a projecting rock and watched the snail-like pace and serpentine length of the train below him. But it reached him at last, though the interval of waiting was almost unendurable.

It took Tom but a few moments to place his fellow teamsters in possession of all the facts he deemed it necessary for them to know. Then the body was deposited on one of the loads and reverently covered; and the journey to Deadwood—which was not distant—was recommenced.

CHAPTER II.

A STARTLING DISCOVERY.

LAWRENCE BEESON, a merchant of Deadwood, was sitting beneath the white awning that shaded his store, and giving an occasional anxious glance down the street that opened into the southern trail. He was expecting the bull train in from Sidney that morning, and was in a hurry for its appearance. The Deadwood and Sidney stage had passed it the night before and he knew the train would arrive that morning.

Beeson was inclined to fleshiness, had a smoothly-shaven face, black, restless eyes, and an alert glance. He was pulling savagely at a cigar held between his lips, without appearing to know what he was doing.

The incoming train was his, and its goods were to be exposed for sale in his store. That had been the original plan—the plan still in his mind until long after the train had left Sidney. It had been subject to a recent change; and his intention now was to have the goods conveyed to another point, without reloading.

In spite of his evident nervousness, he did not rise from his seat, nor remove the cigar from his lips, when he beheld the expected train enter the street; but retained his recumbent attitude until the first wagon came to a halt in front of the building.

This was the wagon in charge of Teamster Tom.

"Drive into the rear lot, and leave the wagon standing there with its load!"

These instructions Beeson shouted; and he seemed somewhat amazed, when, instead of obeying them, the driver tucked his long whip under his arm and came toward the store.

"I found my pard dead by the side of the trail, yesterday. The body is in the wagon next to mine. I shall have to ask you to send one of the store boys to take charge of the teams, so that I may have it conveyed to the undertaker's."

Why, at these words, did Lawrence Beeson recoil, as if stung by a serpent.

Teamster Tom saw the sudden pallor blanch the face of his employer, and wondered at it. If he accounted for it at all, it was on the theory that Beeson was supremely surprised by the information.

Whatever may have been the cause, Beeson recovered instantly, and was filled with anxious and solicitous questions. He not only sent one of the store boys to take care of the oxen, but called out others to assist with the body (which soon arrived,) and gave likewise his own time and advice.

After Jim Ross's body had been removed to the undertaker's, and a fruitless inquest held, and such friends as he had in Deadwood had been advised of his death and of the time and arrangements for the funeral, Teamster Tom returned to Beeson's store.

He found that all of the trail wagons comprised in Beeson's train had been corralled in the big lot in the rear of the store building, and that no portion of the goods had been unloaded.

"I am going to remove my store, and everything I have, to the base of Shoshone Mountain," Beeson announced, in explanation of this matter to Laidlaw. "I, and some of my friends have located mining claims there; and we have formed a company for the development of them, and propose to build up a town. The mines are rich, and I expect matters to be humming there inside of a month; and consequently these goods will bring more there than they will if sold out here. I shall have the teams start for that point this afternoon. I presume, of course, you wouldn't want to go on account of the death of your friend, and so have secured a driver to take your place."

It was only with great difficulty that Teamster Tom succeeded in repressing his amazement. The mine discovered by Jim Ross was at the Base of Shoshone Mountain! Could it be possible that Beeson and his friends had already found and secured it?

He asked some questions aimed to uncover this point; and was not a little troubled when he found that Beeson's mines were in the same neighborhood, and probably at the exact point. It was possible, even more than possible, that

the mines were identical with the one found by Ross.

He did not dare make his questions too pointed, for that would bring about a revelation that might be ruinous. All he could do was to wait and hope that they had not found the quartz vein which Ross's diary stated was so marvelously rich.

Further conversation with Beeson revealed that a town had already been plotted at the mountain's base, near the mines, and it had been given the name of Shoshone.

In spite of his fears, Teamster Tom remained in Deadwood to pay the last sad respects to his dead pard, while Beeson's teams and men set out for Shoshone.

Laidlaw followed as soon afterward as he could.

When he reached the new town and the new mines, he found the latter in the exact vicinity of the spot indicated by Ross; and his first thought was that Ross's mine had been found and taken. But when he came to make a thorough search and to study the landmarks more closely, he found he was in error. Beeson's mines were near Ross's gold-bearing vein, but so far, in the wild search that was already going on, it had been overlooked.

Teamster Tom considered this a good omen, and hastened to establish his right to the vein by doing such acts as were necessary to secure it.

The town of Shoshone still existed only in fancy. A few tents had been erected and a rough shed or two, and lumber was being hauled from the nearest saw-mill. The town site had been duly surveyed and plotted, however, and looked pretty enough—on paper. One of the sheds was in use for the company's office; and in it a copy of the plotted site had been framed and hung for the benefit of an interested public, and with a view to catching the eyes of prospective purchasers of town lots.

When Teamster Tom had made sure that nothing was left undone to secure him a perfect title to the mine—he had already named it the Dead Man's Mine—he took a look at this plot; and concluded that, inasmuch as he was certain to become a citizen of Shoshone, he should like to have a few of the best located lots. Beeson was not there, and he said nothing to the company's agent about it; but he made a memorandum of the number of the different lots and blocks he would like to possess, and stowed it away for future use.

Beeson visited Shoshone, on the ensuing day, and when he learned of the filing on the Dead Man's Mine, he flew into a rage. He seemed to consider the act of Teamster Tom a piece of treachery aimed directly at him. Probably the cause of his anger was chagrin and mortification at the fact that one of his "bull-skinners" had virtually stolen a march on him and his friends and secured the best claim there was at the foot of Shoshone Mountain.

This was a thing already well-known and commented on. The miners and prospectors who were already flocking to the place, knew a rich vein of ore when they saw it; and not one of them but had been free to say that the claim of Teamster Tom was the richest one yet found in these new diggings.

The result of Tom's supposed accidental discovery added to the gold mania which existed, and the search for other leads and veins was carried on amidst maddening excitement. Scarcely a man could be found to drive a team or nail a board; and the indications were that the labor of building the houses of the new town and of opening the new mines would go on but slowly.

Lawrence Beeson was shrewd enough to conceal from Laidlaw the inward rage he felt, and which, when alone, he had given free play to. It was with a calm and unruffled manner that he met "the bull-skinner," as he secretly and contemptuously termed him.

"I learn you've been making a great find!" he exclaimed, with as much apparent enthusiasm as if the news had been of the most pleasing character. "Permit me to congratulate you! You will, of course, become a citizen of our town, and help us along with the boom!"

"By the way, what will you take for your claim?"

"It is not for sale," was Laidlaw's quiet rejoinder.

"Why, you haven't the money to develop it with! Better sell out to me, don't you think? I'll give you a good stiff figure for it."

There was something in the tone, more than in the words, which struck Teamster Tom disagreeably.

"It isn't for sale," he repeated. "I don't think it will be much trouble to get some one to join with me in working it."

"A capital idea, if you won't sell! Come into our company with your mine. We've formed a joint stock concern for the purpose of working the Shoshone mines, and we're going to put in machinery to do the work right, and will get out of the ore all there is in it."

It seemed a fair enough proposition, but Teamster Tom negatively shook his head.

"Why, what's the matter with you, Laidlaw?" with sharp suspicion.

"Nothing," said Tom. "I'm not ready to make any move, yet, in the matter. Of course I sha'n't want to work for you any longer, now; and I stepped over to see if you could pay me my wages for the last trip to Sidney. It ain't much, but it will help me along."

Beeson could not conceal a frown of disappointment, but he said nothing further on the subject of the mine just then; and going to a valise which he had brought with him, took therefrom a small bag of nuggets and gold-dust and poured a portion of its contents into the pan of a small pair of scales.

Teamster Tom's eyes brightened strangely, when they fell on the nuggets. He lifted himself rigidly and his voice had a husky sound, when he spoke again; but he took the nuggets and dust weighed out to him, and departed without revealing anything of his thoughts.

As soon as he was once more alone he drew one of the nuggets from the pouch in which he had stowed them, and scrutinized it carefully.

"That has a bad look!" was his soliloquy. "Where did Lawrence Beeson get this nugget? I'm willing to swear in any court of justice that it belonged to Jim Ross. He showed it to me the last time we met in Deadwood, and we talked about its odd look. There never was another nugget just like it."

The nugget was not large, nor of especially great value, but it had a curious mottled appearance, and through it there seemed to run a series of mossy, greenish threads, which caused it to resemble a golden-hued moss agate. In addition, there was on one side a fanciful resemblance to a human face, lifted above the surface like a rude cameo cutting.

It was certainly an odd nugget; and, as Teamster Tom had asserted, there was small likelihood that another existed just like it.

When he had first beheld it on Beeson's scales, the belief had been irresistibly forced on him that Beeson had not gained possession of it by fair means. He scarcely had the mental hardihood at that time to accuse, even in his own mind, this smiling, smooth-faced man of being the murderer of Jim Ross. But now he bluntly asked himself, what did it all mean?

It was true the nugget might have come into Beeson's hands in the most innocent and natural manner in the world. Ross might have exchanged it for something long before his death, and thus put it in circulation; or the murderer of Ross, after taking it from the dead man's pockets, might have done the same thing. In the course of trade it might thus very naturally have drifted into Beeson's hands; and now, by some strange fate, it had returned to Teamster Tom, the dead man's pard.

There was one thing which Tom was able to assure himself of, after much reflection, and that was that Ross had not parted with the nugget during his life. He could remember that Ross had said he meant to keep it; and this he would certainly have done, unless pressed by necessity. That he had not been so pressed, Teamster Tom had ample proof.

There were but two other conclusions to be reached. Beeson had obtained the nugget by murder and robbery; or, he had got it in the channels of trade directly or indirectly from another who had committed the crime. That it had been taken from Ross after his death was a thing Teamster Tom could not doubt.

Here was a clew which, if followed persistently, might lead to the discovery of the murderer or murderers. It was of so obscure and baffling a character, however, that it seemed only to serve as a tantalizing hint, and gave little hope of a penetration of the mystery.

But it was better than no clew at all; and Teamster Tom, with the detective's enthusiasm aroused within him, resolved to follow it up at whatever cost of time and labor. To go direct to Beeson for an explanation would never do;—for if Beeson was really guilty, this would only be to put him on his guard. Beeson had not noticed the peculiar character of the nugget, that was certain. The peculiarity was not observable at first glance. If Beeson's attention had been drawn to it, the chances seemed a thousand to one, that he would have spoken of it when he paid it over to Laidlaw—that is, if he were not guilty. If guilty, and aware of the nugget's oddity, he would not have paid it to him at all.

This was as far as Teamster Tom's reasoning was able to lead him. He must seek for further light.

CHAPTER III.

THE RUNAWAY STAGE.

SHOSHONE was located several miles from the regular southern stage line; otherwise Lawrence Beeson would not have had the bull-teams drag their heavy loads to Deadwood before going to that point. It was much nearer to Deadwood than it was to Buffalo Gap, the southern town of the hills, and almost on the air line between the two places. This was a fact jubilantly noted by the Shoshone boomers, and largely advertised to the world. The projected railway was to strike the hills at Buffalo Gap, and it seemed probable that the line northward from the Gap would strike Shoshone.

The establishment of the new town, with the opening of the mines located there, called for a new stage line from Deadwood; which was speedily put in operation.

The new trail lay through a wild country; and along it Teamster Tom rode one day, two or three weeks after the incidents last related, bound from Shoshone to the Black Hills Capital.

He was mounted on a broncho and, bearing the coming of the rumbling stage, drew aside to allow it pass, for the broncho was a half-tbroken and skittish creature that was likely to scare at a much less frightful monster than a rattling stage coach.

A long line of trail was visible at that point; and when the stage came in sight, Teamster Tom was made aware that something was wrong. The four horses attached to it were tearing along at a break-neck rate, bouncing the vehicle from side to side in a most dangerous and reckless fashion.

Strangest of all, there was no one on the driver's seat, and no effort was being made by any of the passengers, if there were any such, to stop the runaway horses.

Laidlaw's immediate conclusion was that the driver had been shot by road-agents and the horses scared into this mad dash.

There was a dangerous ledge, which the racing animals would be compelled to pass over with their burden, and the chances seemed good that the coach would bound from the trail at that point, and carry its occupants and the teams to an awful death in the wild canyon below.

Teamster Tom forgot any peril that might come to him, and spurred the broncho forward, hoping for an opportunity to do something to prevent such a catastrophe.

As he did so, the bounding stage swung around a corner and turned toward the ledge, poised for a few perilous moments on two spinning wheels; and in that short interval, he saw the side door of the vehicle thrown open, and a terrified woman's face peer out, and then shrink back. She had meant to leap for her life, but had not had the courage; and was no doubt crouching on the floor of the stage, in a very agony of fear.

The sight was sufficient to arouse Laidlaw to the utmost.

The ledge still lay between him and the stage; but as it was of no great length he thought it possible to gain the other side and to stop the teams before the point of greatest danger was reached.

It was a risky thing to attempt. Should he not succeed in crossing the ledge, but be forced to meet the stage after it had reached that narrow pathway, the result would inevitably be disastrous. With the stage teams rushing toward him, and he toward them, their dangerous positions can be easily seen.

However, to remain where he was seemed like inviting the stage to plunge to destruction.

Scarcely a moment of thought was given to this; and then he seated himself firmly in his saddle and struck his spurs into the broncho's flanks. It was away like an arrow, and the race for life, or death, was begun.

Though the broncho flew onward like the wind, urged into furious speed by the goading spurs, its pace seemed snail-like to the excited man who clung to the saddle. The runaway stage-horses appeared to be coming with a speed equally as great, if not greater.

A prayer arose from Laidlaw's whitening lips—a prayer that he might not be too late; and then, with merciless severity, he again plunged his spurs into the sides of the straining pony.

Had he but known it, he was at that moment riding at a speed faster than he had ever before ridden in his eventful life. The hoofs of the speeding pony seemed scarcely to touch the earth. With neck extended, nose stretched almost straight out before it, and with mane and tail streaming out in the wind like bairy meteors, it passed over the ledge trail with almost the velocity of a flying bird.

Teamster Tom never gave a look to the yawning chasm below him, not a glance to the crowding wall on his left, but kept his gaze glued on the advancing stage-horses.

He felt almost like shrieking with delight when the last boulder was passed, the open trail stretched before him, and he knew he had won. But he did not check the broncho there. He drove it on with the same frightful speed; and, when near the on-coming horses, flung himself from the saddle, allowed the broncho to go whither it would, and poised himself for the terrible leap he intended to take.

He half drew his revolver at first, thinking it might be the wisest course to slay the leaders and thus bring the teams to a halt. But this involved risk. Revolver-shooting under such circumstances was an uncertain thing. Some of the bullets might fly wild and injure the stage occupants. He did not know if there were more than one!

He thrust the revolver back; and, as the vehicle lunged by, the horses swerving and dragging frightenedly at their traces, he ran quickly forward and bounded to the step. This he gained, clutching frantically at the handholds.

It was not easy to retain his position there;

but he did it, and with much difficulty climbed to the seat.

The lines were trailing beneath the horses' feet, some of them being entangled. In spite of the danger involved, he slipped to the wagon-pole, and, stooping down, picked up the lines, one by one.

It was a feat few men could have accomplished under such conditions; but Teamster Tom had had much experience in dealing with horses; and this was not the first time he had tried to stop a runaway team.

Even with the lines in his hands, and seated on the box, the only thing he could do for a time was to permit the horses to continue their wild flight, using the reins to steady them as they swung along the dangerous declivity. But when the danger point had been passed in safety, he drew hard in, sawing the horses from side to side, and with soothing calls endeavoring to quiet them. They passed over nearly a mile, however, before he was able to bring them to a halt; and then they stood with drooping heads and heaving sides, all the life and fire seeming to have suddenly deserted them.

Teamster Tom did not stop to note this, but sprang immediately to the ground and opened the coach door. There was another hand on the inner knob as he pressed the outer; and when the door swung open, he found himself face to face with a lady whom he well knew.

"Miss Lawrence!" he ejaculated, drawing back in surprise.

"Mr. Laidlaw!" was her responsive exclamation; and then, while the tears swam in her eyes, she gave him her hand and permitted him to assist her to the ground.

She was the only occupant of the coach.

Observing this fact, Teamster Tom began to ply her with a series of questions which served well to cover his too evident confusion.

The answers were readily and ingenuously given.

The driver had been acting queerly all the way from Deadwood, she said; and, when about a mile beyond the precipice, he began to shout loudly and to lash the horses into a desperate run. She could not make out all he said, but it was soon plain that he believed himself in danger from road-agents. As there were no road-agents near, and he continued to lash the horses and to shriek wildly, she was quickly convinced that he was insane.

This placed her in a dreadful plight, and her terror was indescribable. To be in a stage coach driven by a maniac driver at so terrific a pace over so frightful a trail was a situation fearful to contemplate.

It was almost a positive relief to her when he gave one final wild scream, hurled himself bodily from the seat, and sped frantically into the hills. A relief, even though she knew the horses were running away, and that the most dangerous portion of the trail lay before them.

For a time she was so absolutely frozen by the horror of her position that she could do nothing but crouch on the rocking floor. Driven to desperation, finally, by the knowledge that the canyon was near, she opened the door to leap out, but drew back with failing courage. It had been at this moment that Teamster Tom saw her.

She was so grateful, so filled with words of thanks, and so quivering from her recent excitement, that Teamster Tom longed in the honesty of his soul to fold her in a soothing embrace; for, although he had never dared hint to her of such a thing, he had long loved this queenly woman; and had enshrined her image in his heart.

The worst of it was, too—especially since the happening of recent events—that this woman was a cousin of Lawrence Beeson, Teamster Tom's late employer, and the man whom he so darkly suspected.

Laidlaw had become acquainted with Miss Fawnie Lawrence while he was working for Beeson. She had always been very kind and very gracious in her demeanor toward him; but her station in life, combined with the fact that he was only a poor "bull-skinner," with no prospects of soon becoming anything better, did not encourage him to make any advances.

He had had dreams, of course, as all lovers do, but he had accounted them only dreams; and even the wildest of them had not been able to bring to him the belief that she would ever care anything for him.

It was the supremest satisfaction of his life to have been able to thus rescue her from her great peril, and to hear her praise sounding so sweetly in his ears.

The horses were quiet enough, now, and he was in no hurry to have them continue their journey, even though he knew he would be their driver and have Miss Lawrence for his fair passenger. This present conversation was pleasant, and he desired to make the most of it.

But when he could find no further excuse for delay, he assisted her into the coach; and, turning the stage about, retraced their way along the trail until they came again near to the precipice.

His broncho was grazing on the scanty herbage at the opposite end of the ledge. Miss Lawrence was too shaky and too afraid of the

perilous path to consent to cross over it again in the coach; and so the stage-horses were tied to a convenient tree; and while he crossed the ledge on foot, she stood watching him.

"I think I should prefer to ride on the box with you," she declared, when he returned and announced his readiness to conduct her on to Shoshone; and when she was seated at his side and they were bowling merrily along again, she continued, with rare frankness:

"I'm afraid Mr. Beeson wouldn't be pleased if he saw me now. He hasn't liked you, you know, since you took up that mine. He thought it ought to have been his. You gave it a horribly queer name, I think!"

"The name is suggestive, though," he asserted; and then proceeded to tell her why he had called his claim the Dead Man's Mine.

That was a never-to-be-forgotten journey. It was all too short, and the time slipped away all too rapidly. But it came to an end, finally, as all things must, whether of good or ill; and Teamster Tom drew the horses to a halt before the new stage station in the new town of Shoshone.

There was a frown on Beeson's face when he saw Miss Fawnie Lawrence sitting on the box by Laidlaw's side—for she had insisted on riding into the town in that way.

"I wouldn't do something in the wilderness that I wouldn't do on the king's highway," she averred; and Laidlaw was well content to have it so, even though he was reasonably sure it would not be pleasant to her high-spirited relative.

Lawrence Beeson turned white as ashes when he heard how the stage-driver, Ben Barton—or Broncho Barton, as he was better known—had suddenly become a raving maniac, and what the result had been.

His almost instant declaration was that it would not be safe to allow Barton to roam the hills, and that the security of the traveling public, and the good of the unfortunate man, demanded his capture and transportation to an insane asylum.

Something of the kind was attempted, but Barton remained undiscovered in the hills.

CHAPTER IV.

A SIGNIFICANT CONFERENCE.

"You think you have tumbled to something, eh?"

The question was asked by one flashily dressed man of another, in a second story room of a frame building on Deadwood's principal thoroughfare.

On the door of this room, and also swinging from a projecting iron bar over the street from the stairway below, was a gilt sign, bearing the name of D. Webster Langdon, Attorney-at-law.

The one window of the little room overlooked the noisy street, from which the roar of traffic never entirely died away, and commanded a view of some hillsides in the foreground, which were thickly knobbed with the stumps of the many trees that had been removed from them. There were hastily constructed houses climbing the terraces of these hills, and perched in a multitude of odd places.

Langdon was looking out of this window, but he saw nothing of the ragged landscape. The view was not a pretty one, and if it had been, he would not have cared to gaze at it.

He wheeled about in answer to the question, and looked at the questioner.

The two men resembled each other very much. This resemblance was not so observable in their features as it was in their peculiar attitudes and expressions, and in the similarity of their dress. Both wore garments that were large of plaid, bright of color, and of the latest cut. Their linen was of the whitest, their neckerchiefs of the gaudiest, and their hats of the stiffest and shiniest type. A sparkling jewel, which may have been a diamond or a bit of cut glass, gleamed from each broad breast.

The reader need scarcely be told that they were typical representatives of that class of men so numerous in every new western community, and who live by their wits and the misfortunes of their fellow-beings. They are the confidence-men, the gamblers, and the rouses, and are a menace and a disgrace to every place in which they temporarily sojourn.

Deadwood and the entire Black Hills region was filled with them, and their deeds in that early time covered the country with a stigma from which it long and somewhat unjustly suffered.

"You got my letter?" was the answering query, as the two faced each other.

"I did; and that's what brought me here. I judged from it that you've hit on something."

The speaker who was known to his associates as Monte Faggett, but who usually preferred his real or assumed name, Smith Faggett, showed his white, even teeth in a wolfish, eager smile.

"Well, I think I've found her!" and Langdon brought his shapely white hand down on Faggett's knee with a resounding slap. "If I'm not mistaken, Faggett, you're in luck!"

This was delightful news, and Faggett smiled more broadly than before.

"I'm hoping for the best, of course, Langdon,

but a good deal depends on the future, you know. I don't know, old fellow, but that you're the one to be congratulated. You get your fee, anyway; and a good whack at the fortune, should I be so happy as to corral it."

"Oh, you'll succeed!" and Langdon rubbed his round face, complacently.

"No chaffing, now, D. Webster! I came over this morning to talk business!—strictly business, and nothing more. You'll oblige me by going to the heart of the thing. You say you have found her! Who is she, and what have you really discovered?"

"I've found a girl that answers to your description, though she's sailing under a different name from the one you gave me."

Faggett looked disappointed.

"Oh, I haven't been barking up the wrong tree," he was assured. "You've seen the girl a dozen times, and likely enough know her. Her present position will make it all the easier for you. She isn't standing very high, now, in the social scale, if she is the inheritor of a fortune. Only a servant girl, or something of that sort; and if you're not smart enough and good-looking enough to make a successful shine to a servant girl, why! I'm deceived in you!"

"Oh, drop it, and get down to business! Tell me who she is."

"Her present name is Laura Rudiger, and she is working in the family of Lawrence Beeson. You know Beeson? He used to have a store just up the street, and is now at the head of the boom down at Shoshone!"

"I think you must be mistaken," Faggett affirmed, with some resoluteness. "I've seen the girl, and I don't think she tallies with the description. And then the name!"

"That's where the whole trouble's been, Faggett; she had changed her name. It gave me a lot of bother, I tell you; and the little fee you promised me won't half pay me for my work. But I'm comforting myself with thoughts of the big slice I'm to get after awhile."

"Give me the history of the case," Faggett requested, eying his recently polished fingernails, and then dropping his fingers to his heavy watch-guard. "Stake out the thing for me, will you? I can judge better after you've done that. Some way, I can hardly 'go' the idea that you've struck the right girl."

D. Webster Langdon laughed, and settled back in his comfortable chair. He had the reputation among his cronies of being something of a detective; and that was why Faggett had employed him to hunt down this heiress.

"Well, let's see! Shall I begin at the beginning?"

"Not so far back as that! We both know that somewhere in these hills there is a girl named Myrtle Bostwick, who has fallen heiress to a considerable property in the East."

"And that her loving relatives, administrators and assigns, or whatever they may be, are searching for her for the sole purpose of turning over to her this fortune."

"And that you intend to make love to her like a furnace, and win her—for her fortune!"

"Well, now, keeping that programme in view, I began my little bit of detective search. I got on a trail which took me to Pierre, and from that to Yankton, where I unearthed some interesting information. This heiress we are hunting for bore the name of Myrtle Bostwick, and came originally from the vicinity of New York City to the Dakotan plains."

"I found out that Myrtle Bostwick had kept a little store in Yankton—millinery, I think—that she met bad luck in some shape; and then removed to Pierre, where she set up as a servant girl. I trailed the thing down, and found all the points to agree. There was a Myrtle Bostwick in Yankton; and then, some months later, there was a Myrtle Bostwick in Pierre!"

"You found out these two things, and then guessed the rest?"

"Not a bit of it, my dear Faggett. 'Twas a bit of reasoning. Having a given sum, and you add another sum to it, it's bound to make a certain other sum; which result is not guess-work. That's the way I arrived at my conclusions; and I am so sure of them that I am willing to bet on their correctness."

Faggett studied the carpet of the floor for some time in deep thought.

"You haven't explained how Myrtle Bostwick came to be Laura Rudiger!"

"Ay! that is a missing link, truly. However, I got that down fine. The people for whom Bostwick-Rudiger labored explained that to my entire satisfaction. Miss Bostwick got into a little trouble there. I don't know just what it was—perhaps stealing family spoons!"

This last, with a sly twinkle at Faggett.

"Oh, go on!" Faggett adjured, with an unpleasant frown.

"I didn't know but I might be treading on your corns! It isn't always safe to hint darkly about a man's prospective bride!"

"Go on, will you!" showing his white, even teeth in that evil smile.

"They didn't say it was stealing the family spoons—in fact, didn't say what it was; and I didn't find out. I didn't press the matter closely, for I didn't think it material. The only

thing I was after was to assure myself of Bostwick-Rudiger; and I did that!

"After this change of name she came to Deadwood; this time as Laura Rudiger, pure and simple, with all the past left behind her like an old dress. She worked around here for awhile; and then got a place with Lawrence Beeson; and is now with him in Shoshone. And there you have her pedigree, straight as a string."

Again Faggett became lost in thought.

"Of course she don't know anything about this property that's been left to her?" he questioned.

"I'm dead sure she don't; for if she did, she would hie herself eastward to claim her own, instead of slaving away at Shoshone."

"That's true," Faggett assented. "I presume the proper thing for me to do, now, and the immediate thing, is to make Shoshone my abiding-place; and, hang it! I don't like to leave Deadwood!"

"You can't expect her to come up here and fall into your arms!" was the mocking reply.

"Oh, of course, I'll have to go down there if I expect to work the game. Shoshone's becoming a pretty lively place, ain't it?"

"A regular fly one!"

"Well, that suits me! I'd be almost willing to let the whole thing go hang rather than to bury myself indefinitely in some miserable hole that hasn't got energy enough to take three good square breaths a day."

"You'll have to drop the monte racket, though, if you go down there, Faggett! It might knock the fat all in the fire. You'll have to turn over a new leaf and do something respectable. You might start a church!"

Faggett eyed his amiable friend discontentedly. He was not pleased with the picture that was being drawn, though he saw he would have to conform to it.

The fact that he intended to inveigle an innocent girl into matrimony for the sole purpose of obtaining her money and then abandoning her, seemed not to touch his calloused conscience. He had done worse things—if worse things are possible.

"I presume I'll have to go into business of some kind, or hire out as a clerk!"

"Shoulder a miner's pick, my dear fellow, and don a red shirt. It would become you mightily! If you should conclude to do that, and can get a photographer to risk his camera on you, send me your picture. Have it registered, though, or it will be stolen from the mails. Old Barnum would give big money for it; and no doubt would have it mounted and set up among his other curiosities."

Faggett laughed, in spite of himself.

"I wish I knew the girl," he said.

"My dear Fagget, it's the most fortunate thing in the world that you don't know her—or rather, that she don't know you. Your cake would be dough, sure enough!"

It was a point well taken, and Fagget recognized its force.

"If I only knew that she was handsome," with a wishful expression. "It's bad enough to try to make love to a servant girl; and it'll be ten times worse if she happens to be ugly."

"Fagget, she is a houri! That was the united testimony of her friends at Pierre and Yankton. She's possessed of the form of a Venus, the temper of an angel, and lips like an opening rosebud."

"I only hope you ain't lying to me—which I know you are!"

He got up lazily from the chair, thrust his white hands into his coat-pockets, and looked into the busy street.

"Well, I must be going. I shall start for Shoshone in the morning, and I'll aim to keep you posted."

He took a few restless turns about the room, then sat down at a writing-table and filled out a check, payable to Langdon, which he signed.

"There's your first installment, D. Webster. If all goes well, you'll get another bigger one. By-by!"

With this he drew on his gloves and strolled leisurely from the room.

CHAPTER V.

OFF WITH THE OLD LOVE.

JED MARBURY stared in angry reproach at a man and a woman who were strolling with lover-like pace along the unshaded street of Shoshone. They had evidently taken a walk to the mines, from which they had just returned; and were now on their way to Beeson's cottage, situated on a slope of one of the upper hills.

Jed Marbury was the new stage-driver—having taken the place made vacant by the lunacy of Broncho Barton.

Marbury made the round trip to Deadwood in one day, leaving Shoshone in the morning and returning in the evening; and he had just come out of the stage stable, where he had been to see that his horses were given proper care.

The man and woman at whom he had looked so ungraciously were Smith Faggett and Miss Laura Rudiger. Jed knew that well. He esteemed himself on terms of especial favor with

Miss Rudiger; the truth being that she was his sweetheart—his "girl," as he customarily termed her.

He had never seen Fagget until about a week before; when Fagget had made his appearance in Shoshone with his smooth, even face, his slick tongue, and a general air of gaudy neatness.

Marbury had not liked him at first sight; and was particularly displeased when he learned that the oily stranger had secured a position in the office of the Dead Man's Mine as a book-keeper and general accountant. The Dead Man's Mine had been opened and was doing a big business; and Teamster Tom was so in need of men that he could not pick and choose his employees.

Now, Marbury had another cause for complaint against the new-comer. He considered Laura Rudiger his especial property and was affronted when he saw her walking with Smith Faggett. A fierce fire of jealousy flamed up in his heart, a jealousy that seemed destined to consume all his happiness.

"If she wants to go to walkin' with that turkey cock, she don't walk no more with me!" was his savage declaration, as his gaze followed them on up the slope. "That Smith Faggett's an ornery hound, as any one kin see with half an eye. If he ain't a gambler and a dead-beat generally, with no more heart than a frozen turnip, then I miss my guess."

Marbury felt the contrast between his own sober garments and rather homely face, and the smiling features and flashy plaids worn by Faggett. He felt that if Faggett chose to try to "cut him out" he could in all probability accomplish it; for he had already discovered that Laura Rudiger was a girl of a somewhat changeable disposition. And he told himself that in all likelihood she would be "taken" with the glib tongue and good looks of the stranger.

Jed Marbury had courted Laura Rudiger assiduously since the time of their first meeting, which had not been long previous. He believed himself to be in love with her; and day and night he had dwelt on the beauty of her face and form.

She was not a girl of much education, but she was showy and bright, with a quick tongue and self-assured address. She was handsome, too, in a manner quite different from the beauty of Miss Lawrence.

She was a much larger woman than Miss Lawrence, and there was a certain taking voluptuousness about her which was her chief charm.

Marbury was in a position where he thought they could not see him, and he did not remove his eyes from them until they vanished into the Beeson residence. Then he turned about in a slow and dogged manner.

Jed was mistaken, however, when he thought he had not been seen by Miss Rudiger and her escort. Miss Rudiger had caught a glimpse of him as he came out of the stable, and made a guess at what his feelings were. It caused her to carry her head a trifle higher and to stride on with a triumphant sort of defiance.

Laura Rudiger was vain and shallow, as well as good-looking, and she had been flattered immensely by the attentions she had lately received from Smith Faggett. She considered Faggett a much more desirable "catch" than the stage-driver, Jed Marbury. Faggett had the address of a gentleman and a profusion of polished phrases, and Marbury had nothing but his honesty and goodness of heart to commend him.

Miss Rudiger was something of a flirt, too, and she felt an exquisite twinge of pleasure at this opportunity to show Jed Marbury that he was not the only man who sought her company.

She did not mention the stage-driver to Smith Faggett, having a dim feeling that he would not be honored by the knowledge that he had such a rival. Faggett seemed very far above Marbury in the social scale.

Faggett left her at the gate, after requesting the privilege of calling the next evening; and she watched him with pleased admiration, until he disappeared among the buildings.

Then she went into the house, thinking what broad shoulders he had, and of how well he looked. To capture this man would be quite a conquest in her estimation; and Jed Marbury was given scant room in her mind.

She expected Jed to call on her that evening; and after she had dwelt for a long time on the many admirable qualities of Smith Faggett, she began to wonder what Jed would say when he did call. She had once had rival lovers come to blows over her. That was not pleasant. It created undue and scandalous comment; and she would not wish it to occur again. Especially she would not wish Jed Marbury and Smith Faggett to come to blows. It would not become so distinguished looking a man as Faggett to engage in a bloody quarrel with a stage-driver.

It would be pleasant, though—and here she smiled—to have these two men think hard thoughts of each other, and to become insanely jealous of each other. That would be an unadulterated delight. If they would only become so wrought up with mutual hatred as to constantly pass each other on the street with averted faces—and have the people of Shoshone say it

was all because of her—that would be a supreme satisfaction.

And thus thinking, she retired to her room, and for a full ten minutes surveyed her matchless charms before her mirror.

Jed Marbury called that evening, and was surprised at her graciousness. He had been expecting to be flung over, "neck and heels," as of no more use than a lump of dirt; and Miss Rudiger's attitude toward him was perplexing.

"I reckon I jumped as wild as a skeered cat," he said, eying her closely, "when I thought you'd go back on me fer the chap I seen you walkin' with to-night!"

"Mr. Faggett is a nice man, don't you think?" and she folded her hands demurely, at the same time giving him a sidelong glance.

"I dunno about that!" Marbury grumbled. "I reckon he's nice enough an' good-lookin' enough, and all that, but—"

"But what?"

Marbury was for a moment at a loss for words; but he finally blurted out, savagely:

"I don't like him; an' I don't think he's any better'n he ort to be!"

Miss Rudiger lifted her ample shoulders, elevated her eyebrows, and replied:

"Oh!"

It was but a little word; but, uttered by Miss Rudiger in that peculiar manner, expressed a great deal.

"I don't like him!" Jed repeated, growing angry in spite of himself, "an' I don't think you ought to go gallivantin' around with him. It don't look well!"

"I reckon, Jed Marbury, you're subject to a change of mind. You didn't say nothing against him at all, when he first come here. He's a gentleman, ain't he?"

"He looks like one," Jed confessed; "er he would look like one, if he didn't put on so many airs. I've noticed that gentlemen—the real, simon pure article—ain't given to that."

She laughed somewhat scornfully.

"I allow, Jed, you ain't had the acquaintance of very many."

"Well, no, I ain't; that's a fact. But I think I know one when I see him."

"And you don't think Mr. Faggett is a gentleman?"

"Not by a dog-goned sight!"

"You're jealous, Jed Marbury!"

"Well, mebbe I am. Anyway, I don't want you to go with him any more!"

He said this as if it cost him an effort.

She did not laugh this time, but she smiled in a tantalizing way.

"I reckon, now, you won't shoot him, if I do?"

"No," and he shook his head slowly and doggedly, "I reckon I ain't fool enough fer that yit. But if you go with him, you won't go with me!"

At this her eyes blazed with anger.

"There ain't been any contract signed up between us two that I wasn't to do anything of the kind," she asserted. "And if there was, I don't know that I'd abide by it. I'm a free woman yet awhile, Jed Marbury!"

Jed was shaken by this, but he had come there determined to have it out with her that night, and he resolutely stood to his guns.

"If you go with him, you won't go with me!"

She did not reply for a full minute, seeming to be studying the situation. She was not at all sure yet that Faggett would continue his advances. But she decided to risk it.

"I don't intend to let any man tell me what I shall do and what I sha'n't do!"

She was not prepared for the result of this statement, and almost felt like retracting her words, when Jed, growing very white in the face, arose slowly from his chair, picked up his hat, and strode toward the door.

"That settles it, Laura, as far as you an' me are concerned. Likely you'll change your mind. If you do, you know where to find me, er you kin send a note."

He was gone before she could make up her mind to stay him; and when she heard the tramp of his feet as he descended the slope, she burst into an inconsistent and hysterical flood of tears.

CHAPTER VI.

A WARLIKE JEHU.

THE days went by without bringing to Jed Marbury the expected visit, or the conciliatory note. Instead, Miss Rudiger and her new lover seemed to become more attached to each other, and were more together. In consequence of this, the stage-driver's heart burned within him. To be jilted was bad enough; but to be jilted for such a man as Faggett, was worse.

Marbury had sized up Faggett pretty well. He had felt the man to be a false-hearted and conscienceless scoundrel, and some investigations into Faggett's record in Deadwood furnished proof of this.

He was more than once on the point of stating his beliefs and discoveries to Teamster Tom, with whom he was on terms of friendship, but a fear that Laidlaw might think his words prompted by jealousy kept him silent. That he had been thrown over by Miss Rudiger for the new

bookkeeper was a fact generally recognized by his friends and acquaintances; and he was forced to endure a great deal of good-natured railery because of it.

He endeavored to conceal the wound he had received by a jocularly he by no means felt, and interposed a shield of assumed carelessness against these shafts of his friends. All of which cut him to the quick, and caused to grow up in his breast a feeling of bitterest hatred against the dashing sport from Deadwood.

It never occurred to Marbury that Laura Rudiger was unworthy of the affection he had lavished on her. She had not treated him right; he knew that. It was Faggett, however, on whom his wrath fell. To him, Faggett was the cause of it all; the serpent who had stolen into his Eden and beguiled with lies the woman of his heart.

Faggett was not unaware of all this—could not have been unaware of it; but he only smiled and went about his tasks with an apparent indifference to Jed Marbury, and to the opinions of the little world of Shoshone. He could afford to be indifferent, and he could afford to smile. He had come to the camp for a certain purpose, and that purpose was in a fair way of accomplishment. So long as Jed Marbury made no open row, Faggett was content to pass him by as a person of no consequence. The stage-driver would only become formidable, should he seek to oppose the sport's plans.

The burden of wrath which Marbury carried locked up in his breast was so unpleasant a one, that he could not but dwell on it constantly; and on a certain dark and forbidding evening, when the stage was making its way along the trail from Deadwood, he was so oppressed by this burden that he almost forgot where he was and what he was engaged in.

He was brought out of this state of mental depression by the unexpected and startling command:

"Throw up your hands!"

It was a command which Jed had heard before, and which on all previous occasions he had unhesitatingly obeyed.

He involuntarily brought the horses to a halt, and with something like a cold shiver stared around in the semi-darkness.

All unconsciously he had driven into a trap. He saw one man at the head of the lead horses, and one on either side of the trail; all of them being armed and belligerently inclined.

He knew they were road-agents, and that they meant to "go through" the stage.

He had had this happen on other trails, but it was the first time it had occurred to him on this new line.

He did not spend as much time in thinking over this as it has taken to tell it. Still, his thoughts caused a certain hesitation; and the road-agent sung out again, at the same time leveling his rifle:

"Throw up your hands!"

There were many exclamations of alarm from within the coach, showing that the passengers had been thrown into a state of panic.

But it was not this that caused Jed Marbury to start and stiffen on his seat. That second command, in the voice of the road-agent leader, sounded remarkably like Smith Faggett. So like Faggett's voice, indeed, that without an instant's hesitation, and wrought to a pitch of sudden fury, Jed launched himself at him from the top of the coach with a reckless carelessness of the menacing rifle.

The movement was so unexpected and so astonishing that the road-agent was taken completely by surprise. Instead of shooting Jed, as he might easily have done, he gave a quick step backward, the motion causing the weapon to be discharged harmlessly.

Before he could recover himself, Jed was upon him, roused to a desperate fighting pitch.

The stage-driver had screamed like a wildcat when he made that reckless dive at the road-agent, and this had the effect of causing the passengers to attempt a resistance. The result was a rattling volley through the stage-coach windows.

Jed Marbury paid no heed to this, all his attention being given to the man he had attacked.

"Take that, will you!" swinging out his heavy right hand and planting it in the road-agent's face.

The fellow reeled backward with a howl of pain; and dropping his rifle fled away among the trees and bowlders.

Jed's yell of triumph had an echo in the rifle-shot which he fired after the retreating robber, from the robber's own Winchester.

This encouraged the passengers and brought from them another volley of pistol-shots; all of which, with the flight of their leader, caused the other road-agents to take to their heels with an equal speed.

It was an easily won and bloodless victory; and so wrought up the enthusiasm of the stage's occupants that they declared they would never again permit their valuables to be taken away from them by one of these knights of the road.

Jed's victory was praised in a way to make that individual blush. He said nothing, how-

ever, about whom he thought the leader to be; nor about the blow in the face.

In his own mind he was convinced that the blow had been received by Smith Faggett; and in that fact he rejoiced; for it was much to be able to convince himself that Faggett's character was as black as he had mentally painted it. It was pleasant to think that Miss Laura Rudiger, in casting him off for this sport, had not made much of a bargain in so doing.

He was satisfied the blow had left its mark on Faggett's face; and this mark would be a means of further identification, when he should see Faggett in the morning. He would certainly see him, then, unless—and a great joy came to him at the suggestion—the fright Faggett had received should induce him to leave the country.

The occupants of the victorious stage-coach were a jovial set, as they continued their journey to Shoshone. They were all young fellows, bent on making their fortunes in the mines; fond of excitement and adventure; and they conceived they had won a great victory—which, to an extent, they had.

Marbury was silent and thoughtful on this homeward drive, his mind dwelling constantly on this new role of Smith Faggett's, and on that individual's marked face. He thought he should like to take Laura Rudiger by the arm and point out that face to her, and describe to her the sort of man this new lover was. It would be a pleasant kind of revenge.

But the morning brought a bitter disappointment to Jed Marbury.

He took a position where he could see Faggett as the latter passed on his way to the Dead Man's Mine.

He saw Faggett; and his feathers fell. The sport was as smiling and serene as ever, as gorgeously arrayed, and in every way as hateful as he had ever seemed. *And on his face there was no mark!*

Marbury had expected to see at least a black eye or a broken nose; and when he beheld Faggett's uninjured countenance, he staggered away, bewildered and nonplused.

CHAPTER VII.

THE RIVAL BOOMERS.

THE boom at Shoshone, like that of every other mining-camp where exceptionally rich veins have been discovered, was of the phenomenal kind. The wildest excitement reigned, and countless rumors of finds of fabulous value were current everywhere.

The dream of every eager prospector was to strike another vein of ore similar to that in the Dead Man's Mine, which was the richest—yielding more of the pure yellow metal to the ton—than any other vein in the region. Those who were good at estimating the values of mines, freely asserted that Teamster Tom's was worth more than all the other mines of Shoshone put together.

This was a galling thing to Lawrence Beeson. The mines of himself and his friends were paying well, and he should always have thought himself a lucky man, if Tom Laidlaw, the "bull-skiner," had not come in and made a "strike" so much richer than theirs.

Teamster Tom's mine was now yielding famously, since it had been fully opened up. The daily output of ore was large, and it was paying well in spite of the distance it had to be conveyed. The proprietor of the Dead Man's Mine was thinking seriously of erecting mills of his own to save this great cost.

There was another thing that added to the boom and the excitement. The railway, stretching across the plains toward Buffalo Gap, was coming nearer every day; and it seemed almost an assured fact that it would pass through Shoshone on its way to Deadwood.

Beeson had made Teamster Tom several offers to buy him out, or to buy out an interest in the mine, but these Laidlaw had steadily refused.

He had a reason for this, which did not appear on the surface. He had not forgotten his dead pard, Jim Ross, nor the indications that pointed to Beeson as the murderer. Not even the love he felt for Fawnie Lawrence had been able for a moment to lighten in his eyes the crime of which he believed Beeson to be guilty. He was laboring for personal advancement and riches; but his efforts to unearth the slayer of his friend were not discontinued.

If he had not thought Beeson guilty, he might have taken him into a partnership, for he was in sore need of money while opening the mine.

To get the money for this, he went to Deadwood and pawned the diamond. This did not bring him as much cash as he needed; but the remainder was advanced by a friend, who took a mortgage on the mine as his surety.

With the money thus obtained, he began work; and besides bought up the lots and blocks which he desired to possess, and of whose numbers he had some time before made a note.

The purchase of these lots was made indirectly through an agent, that Lawrence Beeson might not become aware of his object and advance the prices to defeat it.

In this manner he became the owner of some of the most valuable portions of the new town,

feeling sure he would be repaid a thousand-fold. He had faith in Shoshone; and he did not intend that his enemy, Beeson, should gain all the benefit from the advance in prices, which he so clearly foresaw.

As for the diamond, he did not intend to part with that, meaning to hold it, as he had first intended, as a memento of his dead friend; and he was resolved to redeem it as soon as he could.

Of course Lawrence Beeson became quickly aware of these speculations in Shoshone real estate made by his late teamster, and the fact was not pleasing to him.

He had even less cause for pleasure before a week went by, for Teamster Tom began to boom his portion of the town in a way that was hurtful to the rival interests of Beeson and his friends. And thus between the rival boomers and mine-owners there was inaugurated another war which promised to be hotly fought and bitter.

This was the condition of affairs in Shoshone at the time of the attempted robbery of the Deadwood stage.

Teamster Tom was among the first to hear of the "hold-up." He was exercised not a little; for in that stage he had a considerable consignment of money. He could ill have borne its loss just then, pushed as he was for funds.

As Marbury was his particular friend, and according to all accounts had been the hero of the bloodless engagement, he sought for the stage-driver for the purpose of getting from his own lips an accurate recital of the affair.

Teamster Tom had leaped to a speedy suspicion which he did not deem safe to hint of to any one; not even to Marbury. This was that Lawrence Beeson might have had a hand in the attempted robbery.

The detective work he had been slyly carrying on had more and more convinced him that Beeson would not hesitate to descend to this, if he felt it to be safe, and he could profit thereby. He knew that Beeson was as hard pressed financially as himself, and he did not deem it unlikely that this Shoshone boomer might seek to make a raise by this despicable method.

Still, he had not proof on this point; nothing but an ill-defined feeling to sustain his position. Marbury was a shrewd fellow; and so he thought Marbury might be able to give him points.

But he did not get an opportunity to speak to Marbury that night; nor until the next morning, when the stage driver, of his own accord, walked into Laidlaw's up-town office.

This was after Marbury had watched Smith Faggett disappear in the direction of the mine.

"I'm glad you've come," Teamster Tom declared, drawing out a chair for Marbury. "I've been thinking of you ever since I heard of that stage affair."

Marbury dropped into the proffered chair, where he sat as if petrified, staring hard at his friend.

"What's the matter?" Teamster Tom asked, noticing the wondering look.

Marbury passed his hand over his eyes and stared again.

"It wasn't you, was it?" was his enigmatical query.

"What are you talking about?"

"Why, that—that rake you've got on your cheek there! Tell me where you got that, and I'll talk to you, not before."

It was Teamster Tom's turn to stare in wonder.

"Oh, that?" lifting his fingers to the place indicated. "What's the matter with that? Just a scratch on my cheek?"

"Now, looky here, Tom Laidlaw! I've al'ays swore by you; an' now you turn up with that mark on your cheek! Was you the leader of that road-agent outfit last night? If you was, we're quits right now! I sha'n't say a word about it to git you into trouble; but we're quits!"

Teamster Tom could not prevent a slight frown. The insinuation was not pleasing.

"You'll proceed to explain yourself, Marbury, before we get into a quarrel. I got that by tumbling over some rocks in the tunnel of the mine yesterday. What is there about it makes you look so?"

"Jist this," said Marbury, breathing very hard. "I jumped at that road-agent leader last night an' gave him a punch in the face."

"Oh, that's it! Well, I'm happy to inform you that I am not the man. You're too ready, by a big bit, to jump at conclusions."

"I didn't think it was you," Marbury admitted, "but when I seen that other feller awhile ago, he didn't have no marks on his face; an' when I seen you, you had that! I'll allow it puzzled me."

"You thought it was some other fellow," leaning toward him, interestedly. "Who did you have your mind on?"

Teamster Tom expected to hear him say Beeson.

Marbury looked carefully around the room before replying.

"I was dead shore it was this new man of yours: Smith Faggett. I'd be a'most willin' to swear that it was his voice I heard, but bang it! he hadn't any marks on his face this mornin'. An' I tell you, whoever that feller was, I bit him a good clip!"

"You couldn't have been biased by your jealousy, Marbury?"

This was the belief Marbury had feared all along, and which had previously kept him silent in reference to Faggett's evil career in Deadwood.

"Jealousy be blowed!" he ejaculated, almost fiercely. "I ain't no blamed fool, Tom; and I'll say to you that I ain't clean lost my head jist because that girl went back on me. I'll admit it cut me up, and all that; but I didn't go crazy over it; and I ain't a-goin' to!"

"There's just as good fish in the sea," Teamster Tom smilingly commented.

"You bet; and if there wasn't, it'd be jist the same. I'd keep my head on my shoulders."

"And you thought the road-agent had Faggett's voice?"

"I could have swore to it!" in his positive and asserting way.

"That don't speak very highly for my book-keeper!"

"I know it don't; but the evidence this morning didn't back up my idea. If he was the man, I didn't hit as hard as I thought I did. But there's one thing: You'll git along better an' have more money at the end of the year, in my opinion, if you'll ship that feller. This ain't jealousy; it's solid truth!"

Then, in a quiet and earnest way, he proceeded to rehearse to Teamster Tom the information his searches in Deadwood had yielded as to Smith Faggett's character.

Laidlaw had all along been too busy to give any attention to matters of that kind, even if he had thought it necessary; and consequently this revelation was a surprise.

"I want you to help me, Marbury," he said, after a few moments of thought. "And as you've been free to give me your suspicions, I'll impart to you mine. I've been thinking that one of the road-agents was none other than our good friend, Lawrence Beeson."

"No jealousy in that, eh?"

It was a center shot, and Teamster Tom's face colored. Although he had never thought of being influenced in this opinion by jealousy, yet he saw here were good grounds for such a belief.

"Why do you say that?" striving to cover his confusion.

"Well, now, I ain't as blind as a mole, Tom Laidlaw, if I have lost my head with my heart in it. I guess I ain't the only man in this here town that's took a fancy to a good-looking woman. Mebbe you think I don't know how you've been feelin' about Miss Fawnie Lawrence; and mebbe you think I don't know that Beeson is a-shinin' up to her, an' is a-goin' to marry her if he kin."

"She is his cousin!" Teamster Tom objected, although he had heard such whispers before.

"That's all right, if she is. 'Twouldn't hender him from marryin' uv her."

"It wasn't jealousy that caused me to think that about Beeson!" anxious to get away from the disagreeable subject. "I have other reasons. Whether they are of any force or not, remains to be seen. I'll look into this record of Faggett's; and as soon as I can get another man in his place, I'll ship him."

"You know, Marbury, it strikes me that both these men may have been into this stage robbery business. Perhaps it was Faggett's voice you heard; and it may be that one of the others you saw was Beeson."

"Likely these are only wild guesses, but I want you to work with me in finding out the truth of the matter. Will you do it? I'll watch Faggett and Beeson here, as closely as I can without exciting their distrust; and should you be held up again—as you may be—I want you to observe the road-agents sharply, listen to their voices, and then tell me what you think. It strikes me that will be a good way to go at the business. Just now, we haven't enough proof to take any other tack."

"I'm with you!" beaming admiringly at his friend. "I'm with you, even if it does bring the risk of a bullet. An' if I think I recognize the voice of either of them two gentlemen, you bet I'll try to find out if I'm right about it!"

"That's the idea!" with an approving nod. And so the conference ended.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE MYSTERIOUS HEIRESS.

LAWRENCE BEESON, treading the familiar streets of Deadwood, a day or two after this talk between Laidlaw and Marbury, halted with some indecision, and glanced up at the gilt sign of D. Webster Langdon, Attorney-at-law.

Beeson had made the trip to Deadwood for the express purpose of seeing Langdon, and now he hesitated and drew back, as if uncertain whether to enter the stairway which arose before him, or to retreat and take the next stage for Shoshone. This intended call on Langdon was occasioned by the finding of a letter addressed by Langdon to his friend and crony, Smith Faggett. He had stumbled on the letter by chance, and had surreptitiously possessed himself of its contents.

To him the contents were of a somewhat surprising character. They bore upon the cause of Faggett's stay in Shoshone, and were pointed in

their allusions to Miss Laura Rudiger, whom Faggett was so assiduously courting.

It was the first hint Beeson had that Miss Rudiger was about to develop into a full-blown heiress, whose heart and hand would be worth the winning. Should it prove true that Miss Rudiger was Miss Myrtle Bostwick, it might interfere with certain plans of his, on which he had long set his heart.

Any one seeing him when he stealthily perused Langdon's letter could not but have known that its contents were of a bewildering and surprising nature.

The truth was that Myrtle Bostwick was a name not unfamiliar to him. In fact, he believed that the young woman known to the reader as Fawnie Lawrence was the genuine Myrtle Bostwick.

Fawnie Lawrence was not his cousin, as was generally given out, though she had been reared in his mother's family, and he had treated her with brotherly care, since that mother's death.

He had never known, however, that Myrtle Bostwick was supposed to be an heiress; and into this supposititious fact he had come to Deadwood to make guarded inquiries.

The beauty and womanly charm of Fawnie Lawrence had long won on him, and he expected to one day make her his wife, without thinking very much, in his selfish way, of whether or not she would be pleased with such a proposition. Should it prove true that she was to come into a handsome fortune, she would then become a prize really worth striving for.

Beeson halted with his foot on the step, and looked up and down the street to assure himself that he was not observed. Then he continued on up stairs and rapped at Langdon's door.

It was opened, and the smooth voice of Langdon greeted him and bade him enter.

Now that he was in the room and stood face to face with the unprincipled shyster-detective and saw what manner of man he was, he felt more at ease; for he saw that Langdon was a man whom money could buy.

Nevertheless, he found it a little difficult to approach his subject; but said, finally:

"I learned by chance that you have been making inquiries into the past history of a girl known as Myrtle Bostwick. She is a servant at my house—or rather Laura Rudiger, who is supposed to be the same person, is a servant there."

Langdon was a good deal astonished at this beginning. He had expected a message from Faggett when told by Beeson who he was and wherefrom. But he had an impassive, placid face that was fitted well for masking every emotion.

He lifted his eyes a trifle in reply to the question, but whether in assent or denial, Beeson could not tell.

"As you probably know, Mr. Langdon, I am a man of some property, having a big interest in the town of Shoshone and in the mines there. I say this only to assure you that, should I deem it worth while to make you any offer of money, I am abundantly able to pay."

This was greeted with the same indeterminate uplifting of the eyes.

"What I came here for," making another effort to go on, in spite of this discouraging noncommittal, "is to learn what you may have discovered concerning this Myrtle Bostwick."

"I made the search for another party," speaking at last, "and I don't know that my information is for sale."

"Come, come, now!" in cajoling tones and with a coaxing smile. "That won't hinder you from selling it to me, if I pay you well for it. I've no idea what it may be worth, so you'll have to set your own figures; and if I can't reach them, I'll say so."

"What's your game?" Langdon bluntly asked, eyeing him closely.

"If I do the paying, you're to impart the information, not me!"

"But I may not choose to. What's this Myrtle Bostwick to you?"

"Perhaps I want to marry her," with a sly look.

"Ah!"

He again studied the face of the man before him, while he indulged in thought.

He was wondering if it would be safe to sell his knowledge to Beeson. He did not care to injure the chances of his friend Faggett in the race for a fortune, remembering that he was to have a share in that fortune in the event of Faggett's success. But he might take Beeson's money, and jeopardize nothing by telling him what he knew. He was shrewd enough to see that Beeson knew something of the matter already, and that therefore he could not palm off a falsehood on him. However, his friend Faggett, according to Faggett's own report, was making such splendid headway into Miss Rudiger's affections, that probably no harm would come of it; and the sum to be paid him by Beeson would be that much extra.

He could advise Faggett of Beeson's visit and of what he had told him, should it become necessary; though, knowing Faggett's temper, he would not desire to do that.

"How much will this information be worth to you?" Langdon questioned.

"If you'll tell me what you know of Myrtle Bostwick, and of the fortune which I understand she has fallen heir to, it will be worth a hundred dollars."

"No more than that?"

"I consider that a pretty steep price."

Some higgling followed on this point; but when Langdon saw the figures would not be raised he proceeded to detail the history of the girl so far as it was known to him.

Beeson was satisfied with the knowledge thus secured, and after paying the money, took his departure.

His further business in Deadwood led him into a gambling hall and into consultation with a gambler named Tobe Corbin.

The two retired apart into a little room, where they were closeted together for a long time. That they were old acquaintances and understood each other thoroughly could not be doubted.

The conversation concerned Teamster Tom.

"I've got to down that fellow," Beeson asserted, after explaining at some length the rivalry and enmity existing between the two. "He's got it in for me; and if I don't down him, he'll down me."

"Do you think he knows anything of that little affair?" Corbin questioned.

"I don't think that he knows anything, but I suspect he guesses a good deal; and he's working hard for points. I've seen his hand for some time. I'd like to do him up, anyway, even if it wasn't for that, for he's hurting me bad at Shoshone."

"Have you any plans?"

"I thought you might be able to suggest something."

Corbin smiled, knowingly.

"I think I can fix him," he affirmed; and forthwith began to unfold a scheme for Teamster Tom's undoing.

CHAPTER IX.

RUE AND HEART'S-EASE.

JED MARBURY entered heartily into the plan of his friend, Teamster Tom, to discover who the road-agents were. He thought of the jilting he had received as much as ever, probably, but he never permitted his thoughts to so possess him as to make him unaware of what was happening on the trail or about the coach.

He was constantly on the lookout for road-agents, now, with his "eyes peeled and his ears strained," as he would have put it. He was resolved that if another hold-up occurred, he would not let an opportunity slip that might enable him to determine who the agents were.

He had about come to the conclusion that he had not hit the robber leader with the force he at first thought; and still clung to the opinion that he had not been mistaken in the voice, and that the fellow was none other than Smith Faggett. Of course he was not sure of this; and he was less sure that one of the others was Beeson. But for Teamster Tom's suggestion, he would not have thought of Beeson in this connection.

He was certain that another attempt at robbing the stage would be made sooner or later, and therefore was not surprised when it happened.

The point at which the robbers appeared, was in a dark canyon, not over three miles from Shoshone. If the stage was heavily loaded it seldom reached Shoshone until some time after nightfall.

The shadows were not as thick on this occasion, however, as on the previous one, and Marbury got a good view of the outlaws. There were three of them as before, though the voice of the leader was not so suggestive this time.

However, as he stood close to the right front wheel, ordering the passengers to "tumble out," Marbury's frantic desire to know who he was overran his discretion.

The leader wore a mask of a reddish hue, which Marbury took to be a handkerchief bound about his face, and with eyelets cut for him to look through.

The stage-driver itched to tear that mask away and gaze on the features behind it; and when the road-agent stepped till nearer, he leaped at him and made a grab for the mask.

The five passengers had already obeyed the summons, and were ranged in line on the ground, with their fingers pointing skyward.

Up to the moment of making that dive Marbury had also had his hands erected.

It seemed a foolish and reckless thing but Jed Marbury was given to doing foolish and reckless things; being of a hasty and headlong disposition that never stopped to count the cost.

Marbury did not get to see the outlaw's face, but he did see a multitude of twinkling and scintillating stars that flashed and blazed across the heavens in the most astonishing and bewildering way.

The road-agent had brought his heavy rifle down on Marbury's head with stunning force; and the daring stage-driver reeled back blinded, and fell senseless almost beneath the feet of the nearest horse.

"If any other gentleman wishes to make a try of that thing, he will get a dose of the same

medicine!" was the road-agent's stern declaration. "Pards, proceed with the collection!"

None of the passengers seemed to care for a dose of the "medicine," and they remained as quiet and meek as lambs—if lambs can for a moment be fancied as standing stock still and erect, with their fore-feet aimed skyward—while the outlaws relieved them of their valuables.

Then these polite gentry of the hills vanished into the bushes; leaving the aforesaid passengers to lift the injured driver into the coach and make their way as best they could to Shoshone.

Jed Marbury was for awhile unable to understand what had befallen him, after he returned to consciousness within the swinging and jolting vehicle. His head ached with an intense pain; and, when he attempted to sit up, it swam giddily. He discovered that there was a bump on it not laid down in any chart ever gotten out by a professor of phrenology; and a clucking sound from the box overhead told him that another man held the reins in his place.

He beheld about him the forms of the passengers and heard their conversation; and then a memory of what had happened came back to him.

"Gents," he said, lifting himself on an elbow and surveying the four men, "I feel as if a tree had fallen on me. Didn't any of them road-agents throw rocks, did they?"

There was a woe-begone levity in his tones.

"You acted the fool," said one of them, "and got cracked on the skull; and it's a wonder to me you wasn't killed. How are you feeling?"

"Yes, it is," paying no heed to the question. "I al'ays was a doggoned fool from my youth up! Gents, when we git to Shoshone, notify me, will you?—and should we strike any more agents and have a fight, you kin figger that I'm not in it!"

With this he lay back on the coat that had been used to prop his head, really feeling that he was a fool, and that the agents would have served him right if they had killed him. In this time of depression he wished he had kept up his hands and said nothing. It was the old plan; and now it commended itself as the best.

It did not require a long time to reach Shoshone, for the passenger on the box wielded the whip mercilessly, and sped the horses onward at a rattling pace. He had had enough to do with robbers; and did not feel safe until the lights of Shoshone gleamed out of the darkness before him.

When the stage coach stopped, Marbury was lifted out and conveyed into the nearest house, which was a combined lodging-house and restaurant, kept by Mrs. Jennie Partridge—a buxom widow and recent accession to Shoshone's population.

It was soon discovered that the stage-driver's injuries were not of a serious character, though the blow had been a heavy one. There was a marked contusion on the head, from which the blood had flowed somewhat freely; and there was much pain; but there could be little question that, with quiet and proper attention, Marbury would be able to be around in a day or two.

There was not a kinder-hearted woman on the footstool than Mrs. Jennie Partridge; and she left her waiter girls to look after the interests of the famished passengers who had come in on the stage, and gave her undivided attention to Jed Marbury.

Jennie Partridge had come to Shoshone and opened this restaurant and lodging-house at the solicitation of Teamster Tom. They had known each other a long time, and were the best of friends; and the knowledge that Marbury was also Laidlaw's friend may have quickened her sympathies.

"You're an angel!" Marbury declared, when she had bathed and bandaged his head and made him comfortable. "When I git married, Mrs. Partridge, doggoned if I don't marry a woman jist like you!"

Jed was in earnest in this, for the touch of no woman's hands, except his mother's, had so soothed him.

Mrs. Partridge, being an unmarried lady and supposedly in the matrimonial field in consequence, blushed handsomely, and proceeded to insist that she had done nothing.

Jed had taken many meals at her restaurant, and had been accustomed to speak his heart plainly to her. It was a trick almost every one fell into who came within the circle of her influence. This may have been partly occasioned by the public position of her calling; but it was occasioned more by the cheeriness and kindness with which she greeted all comers.

"If you'd 'low me to think of sich a thing, I'd want to marry you!" beaming admiringly at her rosy face. "And that makes me think: have you seen that girl of mine, lately?"

It was a delicate subject, and Jed would not have touched on it in that way to any other living person, with the single exception of Teamster Tom.

"I guess you ain't got no show there, Jed. But I wouldn't go to worryin' about it, now. It'll make your head ache worse."

"Oh, I ain't a-worryin'! Do you know, Mrs. Partridge, I'm beginnin' to think that it's a good thing me an' that girl are out. She's got a temper an' she can't be depended on. I reckon I

couldn't wish Smith Faggett any worse luck than for him to marry her. They'd have it, cat an' dog fashion, right straight along."

"I guess you're right in that, Jed," coming close up to him and fumbling at the bandages.

"I know I am," he affirmed.

It quieted him to have her talk to him in that way. For some reason she seemed suddenly to become his champion; and for a moment he wished she might go over and scratch the eyes out of Miss Rudiger. But no! he concluded, he wouldn't have her do that; and he knew she wouldn't do such a thing for the world, for her's was not a belligerent character.

He was looking at her with half-closed eyes, when the door of the room opened and Teamster Tom came in. Tom had heard of what had befallen Marbury, and had hastened immediately to Mrs. Partridge's establishment.

"How did it happen, old boy?" he asked, crossing quietly to the bed and looking down at Jed.

"I made a dive fer the leader's mask," Jed wearily explained, "an' he give me this."

He was hardly pleased at his friend's coming for it had put Mrs. Partridge to flight.

Teamster Tom made a casual examination of the injury, and then sat down in a chair.

"It won't hurt you to talk a bit, I guess. Tell me all about it! Did you think the fellow was Beeson?"

This led to a recounting of all the incidents of the robbery, so far as Jed knew them.

"I guess you'd better be moved from here, Marbury; and I have made arrangements to have you taken down to my room."

This threw Jed into a seemingly unaccountable rage.

"I won't go!" he asserted, "I won't go a step."

"We expected to carry you."

"I won't go, I tell you; and I won't have anybody wait on me but Mrs. Partridge! Tom, that woman's an angel!"

"She's a good woman," somewhat dryly.

"I'm not a-goin' to leave this place till I walk out of it! You hear me!"

Teamster Tom saw that Marbury was determined, and saw also that his excitement was rising to such a pitch that it was likely to induce a fever.

"All right!" he consented. "Have your way. I'll see Mrs. Partridge and make the necessary arrangements."

Jed breathed a sigh of satisfaction; and he felt supremely relieved and gratified when he was able to exchange the company of his old friend for that of the smiling-faced restaurant-keeper; to whom he could talk so freely, and on whom his grateful gaze liked to linger.

Sick and injured men have their fancies; and there is sometimes no accounting for them.

CHAPTER X.

THE ROAD-AGENT'S FACE.

THE stage which ran southward from Deadwood to Buffalo Gap held, one night, two passengers, characters in this story, and whose movements will be traced more closely in succeeding chapters than they have been heretofore. They were Fawnie Lawrence and Laura Rudiger; and they were en route from Shoshone to Hot Springs, near which they had taken claims.

These were not mining claims, but were a hundred-and-sixty acres each of agricultural land, and were situated not far from the springs which have since become so well known to Black Hills people.

These young women, seeing that land was likely to be valuable in the vicinity of this prospective health resort, filed each upon a quarter section. Very few single women in the Black Hills but took such a claim at one time or another during the days of the great boom. Typewriter operators, bookkeepers, restaurant girls—in fact, women of all conditions and occupations, whether of high or low degree, engaged in the scramble for a slice of Uncle Sam's real estate.

Not much was required to perfect a title in those days. The people held their own ideas as to what constituted residence on, or occupancy of the land, without much regard to the opinions held on the same subject by the officials at Washington. A residence of six months was required before the land could be purchased; but by most of the Black Hills people the word "residence" was interpreted to mean a monthly visit.

Fawnie Lawrence and Laura Rudiger were now on their way to make their first visit, expecting to remain a night or two on their respective claims and so prevent any one from filing a contest.

Robberies by road-agents were becoming entirely too common, especially on the trail leading out of Shoshone. The trail they were now on, they had not passed over for months, but it was said to have an equally bad reputation; and, consequently, they feared they might at any time hear the unwelcome command to halt.

The two women were apparently on the best of terms; and, though they disliked each other exceedingly, they managed to conceal this mutual ill-will very well.

On the journey from Deadwood they had

been very talkative, until the coming of night. This going to visit their claims was something of a "lark," and they wished to get all of the amusement out of it they could. It would furnish an experience worth treasuring in their memories.

And so they chatted and laughed—paying little heed to the other occupants of the stage—until the gathering darkness began to fill them with unpleasant fears. Then they drew closer together and sat with clasped hands, looking through the windows at the wooded slopes—now scarcely visible—that flitted spectrally by.

It is not always the unexpected that happens. In this case it decidedly was not. They expected—or rather feared—road-agents; and the road-agents appeared. It was like Aladdin and his lamp, except that their thoughts brought things far from pleasant.

There came a grinding of the heavy brake on the wheels; an exclamation from the driver, and the stage stopped. Each of the girls gave a little shriek of terror, as, looking from the windows, they beheld the ominous cloaked figures of the road-agents, revealed by the light of a bull's-eye lantern which one of them held. The light of this lantern had not been visible until it was flashed with blinding violence into the driver's face.

"Oh, dear me! Whatever shall we do?" Miss Rudiger panted, shrinking down on the seat in a very spasm of hysteria. I've been saying all evening that we'd see those dreadful men! I felt it in my bones! Oh! Oh!"

Miss Lawrence did not answer with a responsive wail, but sat white and rigid, almost too frightened for articulation.

"Git down off the seat!" they heard the command; and they also heard the driver, as he obeyed with alert promptness.

As soon as the driver had descended, the door was thrown open by one of the road-agents, and the passengers commanded to dismount. At the same moment the penetrating light searched the interior of the vehicle.

Then a strange thing occurred. The male passengers were already in line, with their hands lifted. Miss Lawrence was on the ground, and Miss Rudiger had planted one of her feet on the step. The stage was on a sloping hillside, thickly strewn with bowlders, and one of the outlaws, stepping forward in the act of moving from one point to another, stumbled over one of these bowlders.

As he did so his mask fell off. The light chanced to be streaming in his direction at the time, and, as he scrambled up in confusion, and before the beam could be turned another way, his face was revealed.

Fawnie Lawrence reeled backward against the coach and uttered a startled cry—a cry that seemed wrung from her by an almost mortal agony.

She had caught a glimpse of the face, in that momentary revelation, and she had not a doubt in the world that it was the face of Teamster Tom!

Miss Rudiger also uttered a scream of amazement, and threw up her hands in a dramatic way.

"Oh, Mr. Laidlaw!" she cried, in pointed reproach. "Oh! Oh!"

Then she clinched her hands, rolled her eyes wildly, and for an instant seemed about to fall in a fit.

"What's the row?" one of the outlaws roughly demanded, advancing toward them.

Neither of the women seemed capable of giving a reply; and he stood staring at them dubiously, as if thinking they had suddenly taken leave of their senses.

The male passengers having been relieved of their valuables, the women were commanded to deliver over their purses and jewelry, with whatever else of worth they might have with them.

When they received this, the road-agents possessed themselves of the mail bag, and disappeared with their usual celerity; leaving the stage to go on at its leisure.

"Oh, did you see that face?" Miss Rudiger questioned, in an exclamatory way, as soon as she felt it safe to do so. "I am astonished out of my wits! I never would 'a' dreamed that Teamster Tom was an agent! Never! Never! Oh, dear me! Only to think! And he such a nice seeming man—and I always thought him such a good man!"

"What's that you're saying?" one of the passengers asked inquisitively; for Miss Rudiger was directing her exclamation to Miss Lawrence. "Did you recognize the fellow? If you did, we'll see if he can't be made to sweat for this!"

Miss Rudiger drew back startledly, as if fearing she had been indiscreet.

The man had lost heavily by the robbery, and was therefore disposed to press his inquiries. He was smarting under a sense of injury and indignation, and greatly desired to find some way to get even with the dastardly scoundrels who had filched his pockets.

"Pardon me, ladies, for asking again if I heard aright. If you knew that man, it is your duty to reveal his name. There is far too much of this robbing, and it ought to be brought to an

end. If we can make an example of one of these rascals, it will surely have some effect."

"It's ketchin' before hangin'," the driver dryly observed.

"Very true; but, if I did not misunderstand, one of those ladies recognized the robber whose mask fell off; and that would seem to indicate that he is a resident of a town. In that event we may be able to lay hold on him."

Fawnie Lawrence was filled with a sickening sense, the like of which she had never before experienced. The recognition of that face had gone to her heart like a knife-stroke. That Teamster Tom would engage in so villainous an act as highway robbery was a thing she never thought of. Even now, she could hardly believe it, although it was attested by the witness of her own eyes.

Miss Rudiger's dramatic sentences fell on her like whip-blows on quivering flesh. She quailed and writhed under them.

She paid no heed to the queries of the man, but reached blindly for the steps of the stage and climbed reelingly in; and there she crouched on one of the seats, with her hands pressed to her temples and in a condition bordering on distraction.

"I said I thought it was Tom Laidlaw—Teamster Tom we call him up at Shoshone."

The information was received with a sort of savage glee.

"Could you swear to his identity, madam?"

"Yes;—no—I don't think I could;—that is I don't think I'd want to!"

The gentleman looked knowing.

"You know him, but you wouldn't like to testify against him. Is that it?"

"Well, yes! He's such a nice man—or I always thought he was, until this! Oh, dear me! What am I saying? It couldn't have been Tom Laidlaw! I'm sure he wouldn't do such a thing!"

"I guess it was Laidlaw," was the dry observation. "At any rate, we'll try to find if it was or not. He lives at Shoshone, you say?"

"He lives there, yes; but it couldn't have been him. Why, Mr. Laidlaw is one of the principal men of Shoshone! He owns the Dead Man's Mine, and I don't know how many blocks and buildings. Oh, dear! I'm that turned around that I don't know what to do or think!"

"Better climb into the hearse, ladies and gents," the driver urged, handling the reins nervously. "These horses don't like to stand hyer; and I ain't over anxious to remain myself. Them road agents might take it into their heads to come back and hear some of the good things you're sayin' about 'em."

This suggestion had the desired effect. There was a scramble for the coach doors; and in less than a minute the stage was again rumbling on its way.

The gentleman of the many questions—who had introduced himself as Alexander Sherwin—began once more to ply Miss Rudiger, as soon as the stage was in motion.

He paid no heed to the dark figure of the other lady who crouched in motionless silence in her corner.

The mere discovery that a man whom she had believed to be honorable was not so, was not the whole cause of the intense heart-ache from which Fawnie Lawrence was suffering.

She regarded Teamster Tom with a feeling that was deeper than the mere passing friendship of acquaintances. She respected him for his abilities, admired him for his nobility and manliness of character; and—she loved him for himself.

That was the true reason which had caused her to shrink and quail. Of this love she had spoken to no one. She had scarcely dared to whisper it to herself. It was a sacred and guarded secret locked securely within the chambers of her own heart. It was only at rare intervals that she herself turned the key and gazed in upon it, and seeing it there, dreamed those roseate dreams which are born of such an inhabitant of the soul.

The words which floated to her were like stabbing knives. She knew from them that Teamster Tom must be arrested and prosecuted for the night's work. She did not doubt his guilt. She could not doubt it. And yet she did wish—ay! she prayed—that this cup might pass from him.

Worst of all was the fear, almost the certainty, that she herself would be called upon to testify against him. What could she do, if that should occur? She felt she could not utter the words that would consign him to the living grave of a convicted felon; and yet, if she were called on to testify, she saw no way to avoid it.

A wild, almost a criminal thought, came to her. They would reach Buffalo Gap in the early hours of the morning. A line of telegraph already connected the place with Deadwood—in advance of the coming of the railway—and another line had been run from Deadwood to Shoshone. She could telegraph to Teamster Tom of the plans being made against him. Better, she could telegraph to Jed Marbury, and thus avoid direct communication. It seemed likely that Teamster Tom might not be in Shoshone in the morning; but she believed Marbury would know where to reach him and give him warning.

But she cowered still lower when this thought

had passed through her mind and she realized how criminal the act would be. If guilty, Teamster Tom ought to suffer the penalty; and by doing that, she would become an abettor of his crime. If guilty? How could she doubt it?

There was no mental rest for her that night; and she scarcely spoke a word to Laura Rudiger throughout the remainder of the journey.

Alexander Sherwin grew garrulous in the unfolding of his plans as the hours sped, and occasionally addressed her on the subject. Her replies to all his inquiries were monosyllabic. It would be soon enough to speak against Teamster Tom when she was forced to.

The other passengers were equally anxious for the apprehension of the road-agent, and most of the hours of the night were given up to a discussion of ways and means to bring this about.

All agreed that the proper course was to wire the Shoshone authorities and have Teamster Tom placed under immediate arrest; and when Buffalo Gap was reached, which was about day-break, the message was sent to the Shoshone officers.

CHAPTER XI.

THE BOOMER DETECTIVE UNDER A CLOUD.

THE astonishment of the officials of Shoshone passed all bounds, when this message was received.

It first came into the hands of the marshal, who bore it to the mayor.

These two looked at each other in an awed and hushed way, as if the contents of the message were not of a character to bear voicing.

Jimmy Clover, the Mayor of Shoshone, was also one of its leading merchants, and his store-room was the only office he had.

When they had stared at each other sufficiently long, and had breathed heavily several times, the mayor spoke:

"I don't know what to think of this hyer, Blazer!"

The marshal's name was Jackson Blazer; and it was very plain that he did not know what to think of it, either.

"There's been a good deal of this road-agent biz a-goin' on!" Clover exclaimed, drowning an unlucky fly in a bath of tobacco-juice. "Too much by a long sight! But I never thought o' him!"

"Nor I," Blazer coincided, adding to the pool in which the fly was floating. "This hyer telegram just lays over ever'thing I've heard hyer in these hills. Teamster Tom!"

This last was a gurgling and indistinct ejaculation.

"What air we goin' to do about it?"

Blazer shook his head and ruminated.

"I su'gest that we git a lot o' the councilmen together and lay the thing before 'em. If they say pull him, why, I'm agreeable!"

"He's in town?"

There was an eagerness in this question that could not be concealed. Blazer glanced at the mayor knowingly.

"I low he is. Anyway, if I go after him, I'll git him."

Clover's eagerness was occasioned by the fact that Teamster Tom had opposed him in the recent election. For the same cause, Jackson Blazer would secretly have liked to see Teamster Tom's neck under the iron heel of the law. He was Clover's chum and appointee!

As soon as it was decided that the members of the council were to be given a voice in the decision, the marshal hastened into the streets, for the purpose, as he expressed it, of "rounding up" these gentlemen.

It was an excited party that was gathered a few minutes later in the rear of Clover's store-room. The discussion that followed the reading of the dispatch grew somewhat heated at times, but the votes of those opposed to Laidlaw carried the day, finally, and his arrest was decided on.

It chanced unfortunately that Teamster Tom had been out in the hills that morning. When it was discovered that he was not in the town, the belief that he was a road-agent, and that the message received from Buffalo Gap charged him truthfully, grew in the minds of all.

Such news cannot be kept; and although the conclave held in the store had charged themselves with secrecy until the arrest was accomplished, the news of the accusations against Laidlaw, and of what was intended on his return, flew from lip to lip in a most marvelous way, until the whole camp knew of it.

It was quickly evident, too, that hot blood would be occasioned should the marshal carry out his intentions, for no man there had warmer friends than Teamster Tom. The excitement rose to fever heat; and when Teamster Tom was seen to emerge from the hills and make his way toward the town, it climbed speedily up to the boiling point.

Jackson Blazer, with the men he had gathered about him for the purpose, awaited Teamster Tom's coming with illy-concealed joy. They were all known enemies of the boomer, a fact that was freely and unfavorably commented on by Laidlaw's friends.

"You'll excuse me, Mr. Laidlaw, fer puttin' my grippers on you this morning," was Blazer's smiling salute, as he let his right hand fall heav-

ily on Teamster Tom's shoulder. "I p'intedly hate to do it, but an officer o' the law, you know, mustn't know no friends. When he sees his duty, he has to do it, without askin' questions. At the same time, I want to say I'm sorry fer ye."

The others had closed about the surprised boomer, as if anticipating an effort at escape.

As the marshal made his statement, he produced the warrant that had been issued, together with the telegram, and flourished them before the eyes of the astonished man.

Teamster Tom recoiled a step, and a sudden pallor overspread his features; all of which was taken by these men as indications of his guilt.

"I don't know what you mean!" he exclaimed.

"What am I arrested for?"

"Holdin' up of pilgrims on the public trail!" and Blazer nodded to the papers he held. "I don't know nothin' about it myself, Mr. Laidlaw, but them's the charges; and, as an officer of the law, I've to do my duty. You'll excuse us, if we search ye!"

For an instant Teamster Tom's eyes blazed with anger, and the pallid look on his face gave place to a flush.

"I should like to know what scoundrel has instigated this! Of course you can search me if you please. I sha'n't offer any resistance; but I will make it hot for the men who set up this job."

The crowd, which had been held back by instructions from the marshal, now surged irresistibly forward; and Teamster Tom saw in its midst the faces of many of his friends. Some of these were anxious, and all of them wrathful and indignant.

He made not the slightest objection, as Blazer proceeded with the search.

"Ah! What's this?" and Blazer held up a diamond, with something of an air of triumph. "I didn't know you carried sich things around with you, Mr. Laidlaw."

It was the diamond kept for him so strangely by Jim Ross, and which he had but recently redeemed from the hands of the Deadwood pawnbroker.

"That diamond's all right! It is a diamond; and it's mine! What have you got to say about it?"

"Nothin'; 'cept that there ain't many men around this hyer town that carries diamonds in their pockets."

Teamster Tom understood the insinuation. In effect, the marshal had said that people who had diamonds usually displayed them; and the fact that this one was kept concealed indicated that it had not been honestly come by.

Teamster Tom made no reply to Blazer's words; and the crowd gathering still more densely, the prisoner was marched up the street.

There were a number of men anxious to become bondmen for their friend, Teamster Tom. It was not long, therefore, until the proper papers were prepared and signed, and he was again for a time at liberty.

That afternoon Alexander Sherwin made his appearance as a witness against him; and, after a preliminary hearing, Teamster Tom was held to answer on the charge of highway robbery, to the superior court which was to convene on the coming Monday.

Shoshone was taking on city airs, now, and boasted two evening dailies; and these sheets devoted their columns that evening almost exclusively to sensational accounts of the arrest and preliminary trial of the great boomer.

The papers were rivals, of course, as was naturally to be expected. One of them had always favored Teamster Tom and the element of which he was the leader; while its opponent was the organ of the Beeson faction of the camp.

These biasing influences colored their respective reports; so that one paper was vigorous in its assertions of Teamster Tom's innocence, while its rival as plainly hinted its belief in his guilt.

Beeson's organ seemed inspired, in truth, with considerable ferocity, heading its account of the affair:

"Another Good Man Gone Wrong!"

Perhaps the angriest man in town was Jed Marbury, the stage-driver; and the angriest woman was Mrs. Jennie Partridge, the keeper of the restaurant.

Marbury had almost wholly recovered from the injury received in his fight with the robber leader, although he had not yet resumed his place on the stage box; and that afternoon he devoted to belligerently walking the streets of Shoshone with the proverbial chip on his shoulder. He had his war-paint on in behalf of his friend, and seemed more than ready to fight any of his defamers.

As for Lawrence Beeson, he exercised the utmost discretion. He had very little to say about the arrest and charges, but went about his business as if nothing unusual had occurred.

There was a meeting in Teamster Tom's office that night, attended by his friends and adherents. Marbury was there, of course, and his denunciation of this attempt to blacken the reputation of his boomer friend was unstinted.

It had not yet been told to Teamster Tom that Fawnie Lawrence and Laura Rudiger were in the stage that had been held up, and that in

all likelihood they would appear against him as witnesses. Had he known that, his cup of bitterness would have been full.

The meeting in the boomer's office was for the purpose of discussing measures of defense.

Teamster Tom suspected Lawrence Beeson of being at the bottom of this plot against him, for so he considered it; but he could not bolster this belief with any proof, and remained silent concerning it.

The gathering was startled, however, by an enunciation of this thought by Jed Marbury.

"I tell you what, gents!" bringing his hand down with a heavy slap, "this whole dog-goned business is the work of that three scoundrel Beeson, an' I'll bet my hat on it!"

It was a big enough hat, and a wide enough one; but it was not very valuable; and Jed would not have been out much if he had lost.

CHAPTER XII.

THE UNLUCKY DIAMOND.

THE excitement in Shoshone had lost none of its force, when the fateful Monday arrived. It was understood on all sides that the first work of the court would be the hearing of this trial; and the court-room was packed, not only by the people of Shoshone, but by many of the curious from the surrounding camps.

Teamster Tom had secured a lawyer from Deadwood to conduct his defense, and another attorney from the same town had been chosen to assist in the prosecution. It promised to be a lively trial! A very lively trial! One worth going many miles to hear.

Fawnie Lawrence, who had insisted on continuing on to Hot Springs with Miss Rudiger, was known to be in the town with her companion; and it was reported that these two would testify strongly against the accused. The gossips already knew that they had seen the man whose mask had fallen off, and had recognized him as Teamster Tom.

This information had been borne to Teamster Tom, and it worried and pained him more than all else. He did not know how true it might be, although he knew that the young women had hurried back from their claims in a very hasty manner. He did not doubt they had been summoned to do so by Lawrence Beeson, whom he now knew more than ever to be his mortal enemy.

More than once he was on the point of boldly going to Beeson's residence to request the privilege of a few minutes' conversation with Fawnie, and as often his heart failed him.

Only from the talk of the gossips could he learn just what was expected to be proven against him. The opposition, and especially the opposition newspaper, hinted at dark and marvelous revelations, but did not venture to specify their particulars.

And so the great day rolled around, and Teamster Tom, accompanied by his friends and the Deadwood attorney, took his way toward the packed court-room.

A sense of relief fell on him when he saw that Miss Lawrence was not there, and the hope swelled in his heart that these rumors might all be without foundation.

"What would his feeling have been could he have seen Miss Fawnie Lawrence at that moment? She was seated in her own room, dressed for the street, and the tears in her eyes attested that she had been weeping. The hateful voice of Miss Rudiger reached her now and then from an adjoining apartment; and below-stairs she could hear the heavy, restless tread of Lawrence Beeson.

She had not desired to return to Shoshone, and had only done so at Beeson's imperative command. And now she was sitting there, shivering, and dreading the approach of the moment when she should be conducted to the place of trial.

She was as much as ever convinced that the face she had seen at the moment the concealing mask dropped away was the face of Teamster Tom. But, even believing him guilty, she did not desire to see him punished; and the thought of testifying against him was unnerving and terrifying.

She could not hide from herself now that she was in love with this man—this man whom she fancied one of those deperate criminals, a road-agent! Her heart was like lead in her breast, and had been, ever since that fearful hour when his supposed guilt had been revealed to her. A sense of deathly weariness weighed her down; and if she could have gone away somewhere and lain herself calmly down to die, she felt she would gladly have done it.

She started as Beeson's voice reached her.

"Time's about up!" he said. "We can't wait much longer, or the sheriff will be after us."

At that moment Miss Rudiger appeared at Fawnie's door, and smilingly announced that she was ready.

Fawnie arose with an effort, and with a sinking feeling; but she collected her strength, and with a firm step, followed Miss Rudiger down the stairway.

Beeson, seeing how pale she was, offered her his arm; but she did not accept it; and walked on by his side in silence.

It was a beautiful day. The reign of early

summer had commenced, and nature wore as smiling a face as if the frowns of grim winter had never wrinkled it. The birds were caroling gayly, the winds were sweet with the perfume of flowers, and the uneven slopes of the hills, where they had not been rent by the miners' blasts, bore smilingly their crowns of evergreens.

But nothing of this did Fawnie Lawrence discern or appreciate. For her there was no music in the air, no glinting sunshine on the hillsides, no incense borne on the wings of the wind.

Her strength almost deserted her as she passed through the door of the court-room, and beheld Teamster Tom seated within the railing forward. Several friends were near him, and he was conversing in low tones with his lawyer. She saw him start, as his eyes fell on her; and for a moment she felt she could not go on. The room and all therein swam blindingly.

However, she conquered this, and followed Miss Rudiger and Beeson to the place which had been reserved for them. Her veil was over her face, and she drew it still closer; and leaned back in the seat in a vain endeavor to assume an attitude that should not reveal her misery to the gaping crowd.

She did not look again at Teamster Tom.

The preliminary work of the trial was chiefly over when she entered the room; and she was scarcely seated, and the bustle occasioned by their entrance subsided, when her name was called, and she was requested to take the witness stand.

She felt that her gait was a reeling one, as she falteringly advanced; and when she removed her veil and the prosecuting attorney spoke to her, she fixed her eyes attentively on his face. She dared not look at Teamster Tom, nor at the audience.

She was trying hard to repress all evidence of agitation, and to prevent her anguish from being seen in her face.

Teamster Tom glanced at her in a half covert manner, and his own countenance paled when he beheld her rigid, pallid look. That glance showed to him that she was there as a witness against her own wishes; but—and that was the most terrible thing about it—it showed that she believed him guilty, and had resolved to say as much when the time came.

His heart went out to her in a great wave of feeling, notwithstanding this.

He did not look again, until the questions propounded by the opposition lawyers compelled his attention.

Miss Lawrence did not seem equal to the task of giving an account of the robbery in a connected way and without questioning, as she was at first requested to do; and the prosecutor was ingeniously framing his inquiries to draw her out.

She answered quietly, and in tones that had a strangely metallic sound, they seemed to be so wholly emotionless.

"And you saw the face of this outlaw, Miss Lawrence, when the mask dropped from it?" the attorney asked.

The reply was in the affirmative.

"Will you be so good as to tell the court whose face it was you saw, if you recognized it?"

When that question was put, there was such silence in the court-room that the proverbial pin might have been heard to fall with all its proverbial distinctness. The audience seemed to catch its breath in expectation.

"I thought it was the face of Mr. Thomas Laidlaw!"

"You thought it was the face of Mr. Laidlaw? Can you not be more emphatic? Did you not recognize the face?"

She seemed to hesitate for an instant, and then replied clearly:

"I did!"

"I will ask you again to state whose face you saw?"

"Mr. Thomas Laidlaw's!"

The lawyer leaned back with an air of triumph; and the court-room buzzed like a swarm of bees.

Teamster Tom had been watching her, and saw how greatly she suffered. It touched him to the quick. It even set his heart to wildly fluttering. Was it love for him that caused this all too apparent anguish?

He wished to spare her; and so leaned forward and requested his attorney to omit the usual cross-examination.

The lawyer stared; but feeling there was some reason for this, he stated that the cross-examination would be waived.

The judge spoke kindly to the witness, telling her she was now at liberty to retire.

She arose firmly enough and took one step toward the chair she had recently vacated; then, without a cry or a moan, she fell prostrate to the floor.

The wildest excitement instantly ensued. The spectators leaped from their seats, and the court-room was in an uproar. Teamster Tom endeavored to hasten to the side of the fallen girl. He was forestalled, however, by Beeson.

As Beeson and another man lifted her up, Beeson and Teamster Tom for an instant looked each other squarely in the eyes. There was on Beeson's face a look of triumph, which the boomer detective did not for a long time forget. He knew, then, even as he had believed all

along, that Lawrence Beeson had set in motion the forces that had brought about this arrest and trial.

A doctor hurried forward, and the air was filled with incoherent cries; some men opening the windows, others bawling for the crowd to stand back, while nearly all crowded in a suffocating mass on the people grouped forward. For a time even the sheriff forgot his duty and made no effort to restore order.

At the physician's command a pathway was forced, and the fainting girl was borne from the building.

The trial was only interrupted for a short time. The crowd quickly streamed back, the lawyers and officers resumed their places; and Laura Rudiger was called to the stand.

She advanced with a firm step and an air of consciousness. She knew she looked well, and was the cynosure of all eyes. Besides, she had a story which she was anxious to tell.

When requested by the attorney to detail the occurrences connected with the stage-robbery, she ran over the incidents with great ease, making a special point of the recognition of the robber's face, which she declared to have been that of Teamster Tom.

"Was anything of value taken from you by these road-agents?" was a further question.

"Yes, sir, there was!" looking boldly at Laidlaw.

"I will ask you to state, Miss Rudiger, what those articles were?"

"My purse was taken, with the money that was in it; and also a diamond that I wouldn't have lost for anything!"

Teamster Tom started a little and looked keenly at her. He saw the drift of what the attorney was attempting to establish.

"Miss Rudiger, you say a diamond was taken from you at that time by these men. Would you be able to identify it?"

"I should!" she affirmed.

With a triumphant smile, the lawyer laid the diamond on the table, where it could be seen by all, and then passed it to her for her inspection.

"You will please to state to the court, Miss Rudiger, if that is the article in question?"

She examined it critically, declared it to be the diamond that was stolen from her, and handed it back.

The jewel was the one which had been found in Teamster Tom's possession the morning he was arrested, and which had since been retained by the officers.

Laidlaw recognized the damaging force of this testimony, and saw that affairs were assuming a threatening aspect.

He tried to conceal his surprise at this introduction of the diamond, which was a thing he had not prepared for; and, as Miss Rudiger continued her account, he scrutinized her through half-closed eyes.

He saw that she was a tool, which Lawrence Beeson was making use of for his own base purposes.

Beeson had not known of the diamond until it had passed into the hands of the officers; and Tom, knowing therefore that the story had been concocted to fit the occasion, beheld behind it all the deft hand of his arch enemy.

He did some rapid thinking in those few brief moments; and, before his attorney began the cross-examination intended to shake the foundation of Miss Rudiger's damaging story, he leaned over and held a whispered consultation with that gentleman.

As a result, after rigidly questioning the girl, the lawyer arose and asked for time to prepare an affidavit; his desire being to have the case go over till the next day, before any further evidence was introduced.

He stated that new evidence had been discovered—evidence which until that moment they could not have procured; that it was material and necessary for the defense; and urged that they be given opportunity to obtain it.

This was the burden of the affidavit that was immediately filed. It showed, however, in addition, that the testimony sought to be procured was that of the Deadwood pawnbroker in whose safe the diamond had so long remained.

After a sparring match between the lawyers on this point, the judge ruled in its favor; and the case went over until the next day.

If the excitement throughout the town had been heated before, it was now, if possible, seven times hotter than ever. Nothing was talked about except the great trial during all the intervening hours; and the next morning, when it was known that the Deadwood stage was in, bearing Jacob Thalberg, the pawnbroker, the mass of people congregated about the stage station seethed and roared like a storm-tossed sea.

Thalberg's testimony completely overwhelmed the opposition and shattered into nothingness the artfully-contrived falsehood uttered by Miss Laura Rudiger. Teamster Tom's adherents whooped and yelled with delight when they heard it, and it required the sheriff's severest threats to quiet them into anything like a semblance of order.

Thalberg identified the diamond as the one brought to him many weeks before by Teamster Tom, stating that he had returned it to its owner

only the day previous to the morning of the arrest; thus forcing the irresistible conclusion that it could not have been in Laura Rudiger's possession, and so could not have been stolen from her at the time and in the manner claimed.

The blow thus delivered to the prosecution was so stunning that they could not rally from it, though they made a most desperate effort. They had, before Thalberg mounted the stand, introduced the testimony of the male passengers of the stage; and these they now sought to recall for the purpose of having their evidence repeated. But as they had "rested," as the legal phrase has it, this they were not allowed to do; though it is difficult to see what they could have accomplished by a rehearsal of the accounts given by these men.

These male passengers did not claim to have recognized Teamster Tom, who was at the time an entire stranger to them; and all they could have said would have been to re-state the main incidents of the robbery.

The jury, therefore, was practically compelled to consider only the testimony of the women, and so far as Laura Rudiger was concerned, she had been clearly shown to be a falsifier.

Hence, when Teamster Tom took the stand in his own defense, stating where he was and what he had been doing on the night of the robbery, and denying in toto the charges made against him, the case was practically settled.

Had it not been for the evidence given by Fawnie Lawrence, the jury would have acquitted him without leaving the box. As the jury, after many hours of deliberation, was unable to settle the vexed question, they informed the court of their inability to agree; and Teamster Tom was set at liberty.

He was bitterly chagrined over the result. A stigma had been left on his name. He had not been proven guilty; neither had he been able to win a verdict in his favor. And worst of all, the stigma had been placed there by the words of the woman he loved!

CHAPTER XIII.

A PAIR OF PROPOSALS.

FAWNIE LAWRENCE remained closely secluded for a number of days after the trial. Her general health had suffered from the strain to which she had been subjected; but it was not wholly this which kept her within doors. She could not bear to meet the gaping gaze of the populace.

She saw very little of Beeson in those days, and scarcely more of Laura Rudiger. She did not desire Miss Rudiger's presence and attendance, and took occasion several times to tell her so.

The newspaper accounts informed her fully of the occurrences at the trial, and of what the outcome had been; and as a consequence she hated Laura Rudiger more than ever.

Even though she believed Teamster Tom guilty, yet it seemed plain Laura had lied about the diamond for the purpose of injuring him; and this was an offense she could not condone.

Beeson, made solicitous by the closeness with which she kept to her room, came up to see her one evening, and remonstrated with her about it.

He found her very pale, but very pretty; and the desire he had long harbored rose fresh in his heart. To gain a fortune by winning such a bride would be triumph indeed; and would almost blot out the memory of his recent defeat.

"I've been wanting to see you!" she declared, though there was no mark of pleasure in her face.

"That suits me," and he took a chair, carelessly. "Why do you keep yourself caged up here? You'll make yourself sick by doing it. You're half sick now. And besides, the people of the town are beginning to talk about it."

He was linking her present actions with the exciting incident at the trial.

Beeson was no fool; and he knew that her faint on that occasion must have been caused by an over-wrought feeling, the consequence of a too-warm regard for Teamster Tom. However, he did not deem it policy to say anything about this. He was sure she would have nothing to do with Teamster Tom, now; since she was so thoroughly convinced of his guilt.

"I want you to discharge Miss Rudiger," she said, paying no attention to his words. "She has become so unbearable to me that I can't live in the house with her!"

He rightly guessed that this was on account of the testimony given by Miss Rudiger at the trial, and looked up with some show of warmth.

"What's the matter?" was his querulous inquiry. "She does her work in an unobtrusive manner. What more can you ask?"

"I want you to dismiss her!" very firmly. "I tell you, she has become hateful to me! I can't endure to have her come near me!"

"You are not feeling very well," was his assurance. "You'll think differently about this by and by."

"I sha'n't think any differently about it!" with a positive shake of her head.

"Come! Come, now!" striving to take one of her hands in his; which, however, she drew away. "What will you give me if I do as you request?"

She coldly averted her face, and did not reply.

"You must know how I love you, Fawnie!" he pleaded, thinking far more of fortune just then, than of the girl over whom he was bending; though he did fancy her, and thought her extremely beautiful.

"I have loved you a great while, Fawnie; and I want to ask you to become my wife?"

She persisted in her silence.

"Will you not, dearest?" he urged. "Will you not make me happy by assuring me that you care something for me—very much for me—and that you will marry me some day?"

He stooped down as if he would kiss her.

Her face was still averted; but she roused herself, now, and, with one mighty push, hurled him from her.

"I will do nothing of the kind, Lawrence Beeson!" she cried, her eyes holding a sudden fire. "You've hinted to me before of such things, and I have never listened to them; and I will not listen to them, now!"

His face was white; and for a moment he stood gazing at her, sternly. Then there came a relenting look, and he again advanced.

"You are rough, cousin mine!" essaying to smile. "You made a request of me a little while ago. If you'll give me just one little word of hope, I'll grant it!"

"If you expect to purchase me so cheap as that, you're mistaken."

"You can't help me loving you," eying her with admiration. "I can do that, even if you never promise to marry me."

"I forbid any mention of the subject!" and she turned from him, and stood looking out of the window.

"Any mention whatever?"

"You heard what I said!"

She was coldly impassive; and this irritated him.

"What further have you to say about Miss Rudiger?"

She disdained a reply.

"If I dismiss her, as you urged?"

There still came no reply; and then, when he had spoken to her two or three times in this way, without extracting a word in return, he retreated angrily from the room, slamming the door after him.

He saw that if he ever won this self-willed young woman, it was very likely he would earn the fortune he thought to receive. He was in a wrathful temper.

Unknown to both of them, their conversation had been overheard. Miss Laura Rudiger was the eavesdropper; and in this case she certainly verified the truth of the adage, that eavesdroppers never hear any good of themselves.

She felt, however, as if she had won a victory over Fawnie Lawrence, for the wrathful way in which Beeson left the room appeared to indicate that he did not contemplate Miss Rudiger's discharge. His offer to dismiss her on condition that Fawnie would promise to marry him, ruffled her feelings mightily, though. She felt it quite as much as if it had been a direct snub.

"I guess I'm all right yet," she tittered, as she tip-toed away after Beeson's departure. "He ain't in a hurry to send me off. He couldn't get another girl to do the work I'm doing, and he knows it; and the housekeeper they have wouldn't be any good if left to herself, and I know too much for his good."

Miss Rudiger was filled with like reflections when Smith Faggett called on her that evening. Faggett had not deserted her, on account of the unfortunate exposure to which she had been subjected at the trial, as she had feared he would. This devotion on Faggett's part struck her as quite phenomenal and heroic. There were not many men so circumstanced as Faggett, she told herself, who would do this. Not many men of Faggett's social standing who would cling to a servant-girl sweetheart when she had fallen under such a cloud.

And so she was flattered and uplifted in her own estimation, knowing nothing of the real reasons which made Faggett pay court to her.

"Beeson proposed to Miss Lawrence, did he?" Smith Faggett questioned, when Miss Rudiger, in a voluble and winning way, and without any shame-facedness, related what she had overheard while spying.

Her heart gave a queer little flutter as he said this, because of the strange look which accompanied the words.

"That's just what he did, and she wouldn't have him!" she giggled.

She was hoping and expecting Faggett to propose, and felt a little pang of disappointment when he said:

"You're luckier than I am. You didn't get discharged, and I did!"

"Why, how was that?" looking at him startledly.

"Laidlaw gave me my walking-papers the other morning. He didn't say why, but simply paid me off and told me he didn't need me any more. I think, though, it was because I persisted in remaining true to you after what happened at the trial. He hasn't any good reason for thinking well of you, you know."

She drooped her head for a moment, then looked at him adoringly:

"I was afraid you might quit coming here, after that."

She did not attempt to explain away her falsehood. It would have been a difficult task, and she knew it. She rightfully judged, too, that Smith Faggett was not as high-minded and scrupulous on such points as some men.

"There isn't anything could make me quit coming here, except your own command!" he avowed, slipping an arm about her waist and drawing her to him. "And I shall keep on coming here, or to whatever place you may reside in, until you consent to be my wife, and we set up housekeeping for ourselves in a home of our own."

Her pulses were bounding riotously; and when he bent over and kissed her, she nestled warmly against his broad shoulder, and seemed perfectly content.

"I want you to marry me," he said. "I love you, and now ask you to be my wife. You do love me?"

He drew her still closer, and kissed her again. She looked up with starry, shining eyes.

"You are so good, Mr. Faggett, to care anything for a poor girl like me!"

"You will marry me?" kissing her once more.

"Yes; and gladly! I'm only afraid that you are too great a gentleman for such a girl as me."

"Pooh!" toying with her hair. "You are good enough, Laura, for a king's son. At any rate, you're good enough for me. I wouldn't have you different from what you are."

Her face showed her supreme delight. To hear such words from Smith Faggett had been her dream, almost since their first acquaintance. In her estimation, Smith Faggett was a gentleman of sufficient talent and education to hold up his head with the finest; and this being the case, a marriage with him would necessarily elevate her to the same high station.

"I'm only afraid you'll be sorry for this, after awhile."

"Never!" Faggett asserted, with fervor.

"When I am your wife, you can't forget that I was only a servant, before you married me."

"That won't make no difference. You will not be a servant, then. I'm not a rich man, Laura. For your sake, though, I wish I was. But there are plenty of ways to make money in these hills; and I'm not afraid we shall need for anything. We might stumble unexpectedly on a fortune, even!"

Was he thinking of the wealth which he anticipated this contemplated marriage would bring him?

CHAPTER XIV.

THE STORY OF THE MAD STAGE-DRIVER.

TEAMSTER TOM was sitting in his office late one evening, in troubled thought.

He was in appearance much the same man as when he was introduced to the reader; except that he no longer wore the rough clothing which had then disfigured him and hid the true manliness of his proportions. He was as unostentatious, now, as easy of approach, and as genial and kindly, and with a character as noble, as then.

As a boomer and mine manager, he had been wonderfully successful, and was now accounted one of the richest men of Shoshone.

But all these things did not satisfy him as he sat there with that anxious look on his face. For one thing, his losses by stage robberies had recently been heavy. But he was thinking far more of other things—of the effects of the late trial, and of Fawnie Lawrence.

Although sure that Beeson had been the instigating cause of his arrest, he had so far been unable to obtain any satisfactory proof of it. Neither had he been able to trace out and bind together the tangled threads that pointed to Beeson as the murderer of Jim Ross; and because of this, he began to think that as a detective he was a sad failure.

While thus wrapped in disagreeable meditations, the door softly opened and a strange-looking man entered the room.

It was Broncho Barton, the mad stage-driver, who had been so persistently sought by Beeson immediately after the runaway of the stage teams.

Teamster Tom heard his light footfall—Laidlaw was still popularly known as Teamster Tom, in spite of the rise in his fortunes!—but when he looked quickly around, he did not at once recognize the intruder, although Barton had been well known to him. The light was burning but dimly; and besides, Barton was so curiously attired and his clothing seemed to be so much of the rag-bag pattern, that his most intimate friend might have been excused for a failure to identify him at first glance.

However, when Barton spoke, Teamster Tom knew the voice, albeit it was much changed and cracked.

He was greatly surprised at this visit from the mad stage-driver, who was presumed by most people to be long since dead. It was not known that anybody had seen him since the time he took that desperate header from the top of the stage coach.

Without a word Barton sunk into a chair,

where he sat for a full minute, staring at Laidlaw.

"I'm glad to see you, Barton," the latter ventured, not knowing what else to say, and feeling oppressed by the silence. "Is there anything I can do for you? You've kept yourself so secluded, that most of your friends think you are dead."

"I am dead!" he hollowly whispered, still fixing Tom with his burning gaze. "I was killed by Lawrence Beeson and by—"

"I will not mention the other name, now!"

"Oh, you're alive enough!" striving to laugh, and thinking thereby to arouse Barton from his melancholy humor. "If you were dead, you know, you wouldn't be sitting here talking to me. Oh, you're all right! You've been having odd dreams, maybe. Tell me about them. Maybe I can explain them away."

"I tell you I am dead!" Barton firmly asserted. "I reckon I ort to know!"

Teamster Tom was nonplused.

"What are you driving at, now?" he finally managed to ask.

This appeared to change the drift of the maniac's thoughts, and he brightened.

"I'll tell you," drawing his chair closer and still looking fixedly at Teamster Tom. "I've been doing some spying. I've been staying in the hills, playin' hide-and-seek with the coyotes. You don't know how jolly it is up there the hills, with nothin' to bother you but the wind in the pines. I can't tell you how jolly it is. The wind makes a fellow sleep. I couldn't sleep at all if it wasn't for that, for there's somebody walkin' round and round in my head all the time. Did you ever have some one walk in your head?"

"I shouldn't think it would be a pleasant experience!" not making a direct answer.

"It ain't," said Barton. "When he talks to me and tells me I'm dead, then it's awful. I know I am; but I don't want him to tell me so!"

Teamster Tom knew not what reply to make, but said at a venture:

"Couldn't you order him to leave? Likely he'd go away and not bother you any more, if you'd insist on it."

"He won't go away!" with a sad shake of his head. "I've tried it. How can I make him go, when he's alive and I'm dead?"

It was a poser; and in lieu of an answer Teamster Tom could do nothing but thoughtfully rub his nose.

"You say you've been spying?"

"Yes!" brightening again.

"And what have you found out from your spying?"

"That's what I've come to tell you," drawing the chair still closer. "You know Lawrence Beeson? the fellow that helped to kill me?"

"Yes, I know him," thinking it best to humor Barton's strange whim.

"Well, I've come to tell you that he's not only a murderer, but he's a road-agent. Killin' me didn't satisfy him, and so he went to robbin' stages."

"Ah!"

Teamster Tom caught his breath with a gasp. Perhaps this unfortunate and crack-brained stage-driver might give him the clew for which he had so long vainly been seeking.

"Tell me all you know about it!" he urged; "all about the stage robberies, and what Beeson has had to do with them."

"I will. That's what brought me here."

Both were silent for a moment.

"They're preparin' to hold up another stage."

"They?"

"Yes; Beeson and his friends. I heard 'em talkin' it over last night out in the hills. And they're goin' to talk it over ag'in to-morrow night. I know where the place is; and more'n one night I've laid there listenin' to 'em by the hour."

"Where is this place?" with undisguised eagerness.

Although Broncho Barton was crazy, yet Teamster Tom saw no reason why he might not speak truly concerning a matter like this. The information, if it was not all fancy, born of a disordered brain, might prove extremely valuable.

"You'd like to hear 'em, too? Ha! ha! ha! I thought you would! That's why I came. Well, you shall hear 'em!"

"That's good!" Teamster Tom affirmed. "I like to have you say that!"

"Yes; you shall hear 'em! And you shall see 'em, too, if you like. I know right where the place is. I can go to it on the darkest night, and never crack a stick beneath my feet. It's a regular crow's nest. A little holler all shet in by rocks; so that they can light a fire there and be jolly."

"Where is this place?" Teamster Tom again inquired.

"You'll go there if I tell you?"

"Yes, I'll go there. You can depend on that. If you'll only tell me where the place is, I'll hear every word they say when they meet to-morrow night."

"That suits me!" rubbing his hands and smacking his dry lips. "That suits me; and that's what brought me here. I want you to

know what kind of a man Lawrence Beeson is; and when you know, I want you to tell it to everybody. Everybody!"

"I'll do it!"

"That's what brought me here. I hate Lawrence Beeson! If it hadn't been for him, I'd be alive to-day."

His eyes were rolling wildly, and Teamster Tom saw he was getting back on dangerous ground.

"You haven't told me, yet, where this place is," he reminded.

"Oh, yes; I almost forgot that! You know the little stream that flows down from the south side of Shoshone Mountain? I reckon it's all of three or four miles from here. And you know where the bunch of pines is that you can see from the valley, but which you can't see from the trail? The bunch of pines close to the big rock?"

Teamster Tom nodded.

"I know where that is."

"Well; right back of that bunch of pines is the crow's nest. You can see it if you climb to the top of the rock. It's a ticklish place to climb up, but I've done it more than once; and up there, you can look right down at the fire, and at the men, and hear what they're sayin'. They talk funny things sometimes. I've even heard 'em talkin' about you."

"You have? What did they say?"

"I don't know what they said, now; but that's what made me think of comin' to you. I saw they didn't like you—that Beeson didn't like you!—and so I came. You'll go to-morrow night?"

Teamster Tom could not doubt the truth of what he had heard. The mad stage-driver had found the secret meeting-place of the road-agents;—and Lawrence Beeson was one of them!

"I'll go!" he promised, with stern emphasis.

He would have said more, probably, if given the opportunity. But Broncho Barton, having performed his mission, glided with quick steps to the doorway, and as quickly vanished.

CHAPTER XV.

THE CONCLAVE IN THE HILLS.

THE crow's nest, as the place had been characterized by the maniac, was in a region fairly well known to Teamster Tom. He had never climbed to the top of the big rock, nor looked behind the big pines, but he had been near them; and had no doubt he could find his way there, even in the darkness.

The stage-driver's revelation was much more in his thoughts the ensuing day than was the business to which he gave his attention; and as soon as night fell, and he felt he could slip from the town without discovery, he set off in the direction indicated by Barton.

The route was a rough one, intersected by gullies; and although he had only about three miles to traverse, it required a long time to make the trip.

He drew near the crow's nest at last, and was assured he had not wandered from the right course when he saw the pines lifting themselves skyward beside the great black rock.

He had been so long on the way that he feared he might be too late to witness the stealthy meeting of the road-agents.

He crept forward with all the silence possible; and, having gained the security of the pines, slipped around the base of the rock until he found a place which promised a comparatively easy ascent; and then began the perilous and difficult climb.

He halted occasionally as he toiled upward; and, clinging there like a fly, strained his ears to catch any sounds that might come from beyond the rock. His first halt was unrewarded; but the next time what was unmistakably the sound of voices reached him.

This seemed proof positive that Broncho Barton had not spoken from the depths of his fancy, but had rehearsed scenes he had actually witnessed.

This brought a great sense of relief; for Teamster Tom had not been able to wholly divest his mind of a fear that some kind of a trap had been laid for him, and that Broncho Barton had been sent with his story to lure him into it.

Encouraged by the sounds of the voices, he writhed onward; and having gained the top of the rock, slipped forward on his stomach until he could look over its precipitous edge.

He was just getting ready to take this look when a hand was laid on his shoulder.

He started back in great alarm, sure now, he had been entrapped; but this fear was dispelled by the words that followed:

"You have come! I was afraid you would not. They are down there. See!"

The words were from the lips of Broncho Barton.

The maniac had been fearful Teamster Tom would not fulfill his promise, and so had visited the crow's nest in person to make sure he really came.

This was shown by the fact that as soon as he had uttered the words, he stole backward into the gloom and disappeared down the face of the rock.

Teamster Tom did not deem it wise to attempt

to stay him. Barton's presence was not pleasant in such a place at such a time, and he feared in addition that the maniac might commit some act of indiscretion that would reveal them to the outlaws below.

He remained quiet until all sounds of Barton's retreat died away; and then looked down over the edge of the rock into the cup-like hollow.

"That's a splendid place for its purpose," he mused, "but a bad place for them, if they should ever be corraled in it. They could probably hold back a pretty good force, but they are so ringed in that they couldn't escape."

The hollow was not over twenty yards across in its greatest diameter, and the circling wall of rock completely shut it out from any chance passer on the slopes of the hills. These rocks also kept the glow of the fire from penetrating to the valleys.

Within this inclosure there were a number of men, the major portion of them seated on boulders grouped about the fire. The flickering flame cast its light in their faces, revealing them with tolerable distinctness to the watcher above.

One of the first faces which his gaze fell upon was that of Lawrence Beeson.

An unuttered exclamation of triumph welled into Teamster Tom's throat, as he beheld Beeson's hateful features. He felt now there could be no doubt that his worst suspicions against Beeson were true. His great Shoshone rival was a road-agent.

If Beeson was a road-agent, then he was a robber, and most likely a murderer. These things being true, the conclusion followed as certainly as the night the day, that he would not have hesitated to kill Jim Ross for the valuables in Ross's possession; which would account for the manner in which the queerly marked nugget came into his hands.

It did Teamster Tom good to have the truth of these surmises so strongly bolstered by what he saw before him.

When he looked further, he saw two other men of Shoshone, whom he well knew; but most of the road-agents he was unacquainted with.

The man sitting next to Beeson he remembered to have seen in Deadwood; and as he studied the fellow's countenance, he was able to place him.

This was the confidence man and gambler, Tobe Corbin, whom Beeson had visited in Deadwood, and with whom he had consulted in regard to "doing up" his great rival and enemy, Teamster Tom.

Corbin and Beeson were talking in somewhat low tones; but as they were nearest to Laidlaw, he could catch a portion of their words by intent listening.

They seemed to be speaking of many matters, among which, however, the proposed robbery and certain affairs at Shoshone and Deadwood preponderated.

"I thought we had the cinch on him," Corbin said; and this time Teamster Tom was sure they were speaking of him. "You made a mistake, Beeson, in bringing in that diamond business. You'd have been able to have brought him up with a short turn, but for that."

"I know it!" his tones showing that this statement of a disagreeable truth galled him. "But it was a promising lay-out. Of course I didn't know anything about the pawnbroker business, or I shouldn't have touched it."

"Of course," and Corbin nodded his head. "After knowledge is a heap surer than foreknowledge. But it was unfortunate. What are you going to do, now?"

Beeson was silent for a little while; and Teamster Tom hitched forward to catch the reply.

"I'm sure I don't know. I've worked up half-a-dozen plans, but there has always seemed to be some weak spot in them. Maybe you could suggest something?"

"I can't, now; but I'll tell you what, Beeson! I'll set my wits to work on the thing, and maybe I can drop to something that'll just answer."

This bit of conversation revealed the true inwardness, or something of it, of the nefarious plot which had been aimed at Teamster Tom. Teamster Tom, looking at these two men, could fancy in some measure how the scheme against him had been put into execution.

Corbin resembled him somewhat in size and general appearance, and had a smooth face, while Tom usually wore a mustache. It would not have been at all beyond the range of the possible for Corbin to disguise himself in a manner to counterfeit Laidlaw almost perfectly. A false mustache, and a skillful use of the articles employed by stage artists, would certainly have enabled him to do this.

It may be said here that this shrewd guess was correct, and that the plot aimed at Laidlaw was the outcome of the consultation held between these two men in the Deadwood gambling-house. Corbin had clothed himself in garments resembling those usually worn by Teamster Tom, and with a false mustache and other disguising materials, had given to his features the general appearance of Teamster Tom's. The trip of the young women to Buffalo Gap had been a part of the plan; and the dropping away

of the mask and the revelation of the face were stages intended to lead to the arrest and conviction of Laidlaw on the charge of highway robbery.

Beeson and Corbin had scarcely concluded, when the robbers drew together, and the conference which had called them there began.

There was much talk of stage robberies consummated and to come, and of many other matters connected therewith, but at this meeting nothing was said to show when and where the next robbery was to be. The principal burden of conversation concerned some men who were at that time held in Deadwood on the charge of being road-agents, and of how the release of these men could be best brought about.

Teamster Tom listened patiently to it all, the meeting lasting more than an hour, and then retained his position on the rock until he saw the men glide away one by one.

Then he crept quietly from his elevated perch, and made his way with all stealth, and in much thoughtfulness, back to Shoshone.

CHAPTER XVI.

A BOLD GAME.

THE next morning Laidlaw called Jed Marbury into his up-town office. Marbury had not resumed his place on the stage box, though he was expecting to do so in a few days.

"I guess I'll have to try to coax you to give up your work for the stage company, for awhile, at least," looking knowingly at Marbury, as the latter dropped into his customary chair.

Jed did not try to conceal his surprise.

"You'd rather stay in Shoshone, anyway, wouldn't you? I'll give you a pleasanter place than the one you've got, if you'll take it."

There was only one reason that could have induced Marbury to prefer stage-driving to any other occupation. That was his desire to be constantly near the good-natured keeper of the restaurant, Mrs. Partridge.

Jed was now accustomed to say, in speaking to Teamster Tom of the occurrence, that the crack given him on the head by the road-agent was the luckiest thing that ever befell him, inasmuch as it had made him better acquainted with the good-looking, buxom widow, who had since won his heart. He never regretted the sufferings entailed by the blow; nor did he regret the jilting given him by Miss Rudiger.

"What is it you want me to do?" he asked, steadily eyeing his friend.

"I want you to take charge of the Dead Man's Mine."

Marbury heard this incredulously.

"Oh, I'm in earnest!" Teamster Tom assured him. "I've got some work to do that I can't very well do if I stay here all the time. You're an honest fellow, Jed, and there ain't overly too many of them around. I'll feel safe with the mine in your hands. What do you say to the proposition?"

"I say that I ain't no miner, an' you're a fool fer makin' it! I suppose, though, if you're satisfied to have it that way, I ought to be. It's a bigger posish than I ever expected to climb into."

"So much the better for that. You'll appreciate the honors of the place, and be more apt to do your duty."

"If you'll quit jokin' an' tell me what you're drivin' at, I'll feel easier, Tom Laidlaw!"

At this, Teamster Tom's face became serious; and he proceeded forthwith to tell Marbury of Broncho Barton's mysterious visit, and of what he himself had seen in the hills.

"I'm a good deal surprised about Broncho," Jed averred, "but I can't say that I am about Beeson. I've knowed fer a long time, that he was tarred with the very blackest kind of a stick."

"I've known it, too; and now it seems that I may have a chance to prove it to the world. That's what I'm going to work for now; and that's the reason I want you to take charge of the Dead Man's Mine; and why I'm going up to Deadwood."

After this speech, he entered in detail into his plans for revealing to the world the duplicity and false position occupied by Lawrence Beeson.

Marbury hailed the communication with delight. The plan called for a boldness and recklessness which exactly accorded with his disposition.

"Run the mine fer ye? You bet I will! There ain't anything I wouldn't do, hardly, to give you a chance to work that kind of a racket. Dog-gone me! It's immense! The only thing I hate is that I can't go along an' help ye in it."

With these preliminary arrangements satisfactorily completed, Teamster Tom journeyed to Deadwood by the stage of the following day.

He arrived there about noon; and lost no time in visiting the gambling-house customarily haunted by Tobe Corbin.

Corbin was not in; but when he told the proprietor that he greatly desired to see Corbin on a matter of importance, the location and number of Corbin's room was furnished; and he toilsomely climbed the stairway to this apartment.

He found the room opened on a long corridor,

from which another stairway descended to an alley in the rear; and which the gamblers sometimes found handy in case of a sudden raid.

As it was high noon when Teamster Tom tapped on the door of Corbin's room, Corbin bade him enter, thinking, no doubt, that the caller was one of his chums.

The unexpected visitor promptly accepted the invitation; and when he had slipped through the doorway, he promptly closed the door and remained standing with his back against it.

Corbin was greatly taken by surprise; and, on beholding this warlike movement, he edged toward the table, reaching out one of his white hands for the revolver hidden in its depths.

"No, you don't!" Teamster Tom coolly declared. "If you try to get that gun, I'll deem it my duty to hurt you."

He quickly fished a cocked revolver from his pocket as he said this, and pointed it at Corbin's head.

Corbin shrunk against the wall, in great alarm, seeming not to know what to do; and Teamster Tom, taking advantage of the movement, and still covering him with the cocked weapon, stepped hastily forward and possessed himself of the revolver within the drawer.

"We can talk without so much danger of hurting each other, with this plaything out of the way!" dropping it into his pocket.

"What do you want?" Corbin hoarsely demanded, turning a sickly white.

"It will not take me long to tell you; and I'll get at the story at once, if you'll agree to keep your mouth shut while I'm about it."

As Corbin made no reply to this, Teamster Tom slipped into a chair, which was handy; and, with the revolver on his knee, surveyed Corbin with great earnestness.

"Perhaps you don't know me, Tobe Corbin; but I know you, and have got a pretty steep account against you. I don't intend to try to collect it now, though. I came here for quite another purpose. I'm just in on the stage from Shoshone!"

Corbin returned his look with interest. He, too, had come from Shoshone, or rather from the vicinity of it, not many hours before.

"I guess I know you," and Corbin tried to smile.

"That's good! I see we shall get on famously. I'm Tom Laidlaw—Teamster Tom!"

"I thought so!"

"Yes, I'm Teamster Tom; and I've come up to see you on a little business connected with Lawrence Beeson!"

Corbin's face became whiter, and his alarm plainly increased.

"Beeson didn't send you?"

"No, not exactly. I don't know, even, that he knew I was coming. If he had, and had guessed the cause, I reckon he'd have telegraphed a warning."

"Well, what do you want?" with a show of cool effrontery.

The gambler was regaining his nerve. "I came to talk over that little meeting in the hills last night. That gathering of kindred spirits which you and Beeson attended. You were the king-pin on that occasion, I take it."

Corbin's nerve deserted him again, while his face grew livid. He saw that Teamster Tom was possessed of some very damaging information.

"I attended that meeting, too, though not as a member of the party, nor as an invited guest. Just how I accomplished it, and how I knew the meeting was to be held, I don't care to state, now. But I can easily prove the truth of my assertions by telling you what I saw and heard."

"No doubt your story will be interesting," and the gambler tried to sneer. "But I must assure you that so far as I am concerned, you are mistaken. Where was this meeting held at which you say you saw me?"

"Not far from Shoshone."

"And I was in Deadwood all night!" with a hollow laugh. "I guess you saw what you saw, with your eyes shut and dreaming."

"Oh, I reckon not!"

Then he proceeded with his proof, detailing circumstances and conversations in a way to show Corbin he knew exactly what he was talking about.

"Well, what does all this amount to?" when he had finished. "You say these things are true, and I say they ain't. There the matter stands even."

"It amounts to just this," lifting the revolver slightly, and at the same time drawing a paper from one of his pockets with the other hand and spreading it out. "I have prepared here a paper, setting forth all these facts, to which I desire your signature."

Corbin moved uneasily in his chair, watching for a chance to break past his captor.

"I must warn you that if you try that," understanding the meaning of the gambler's look, "I'll have to block your way with a pistol bullet. I'm in dead earnest in this business. You can see that. If I wasn't I wouldn't be here taking the risk I am."

"If you threaten me further, I shall call for help!" shaking visibly under the strain of his nervous excitement.

"I shouldn't advise you to do that. It would be decidedly unhealthy. If you're sensible, you'll sign this statement without making any fuss about it."

"And if I refuse?"

"Which, my dear Corbin, you won't do."

He glanced meaningfully at the revolver; and then closely eyed the gambler, while he gave him the points contained in the paper.

"This would be to implicate myself and ruin me!" Corbin remonstrated, in a shaky voice.

"I guess your reputation can bear a good deal of smirching without injuring it. I haven't any special desire to proceed against you in this matter. You'll strike a snag soon enough yourself. I want to get at Beeson. You can guess why, possibly; and if you can't, it don't matter. I want to get at him, and this will put me in the way of doing it."

"As for you, you can leave this place and be perfectly safe. I sha'n't try to follow you up; and there's little likelihood that any one else will care to."

"And if I won't sign it?"

"I suppose you think I'm going to threaten to shoot you down where you sit? I'm not. I've got a more powerful argument than a revolver. I was not the only one who saw you last night. If you won't sign this paper, I shall have you arrested before you can get out of town; and you know well enough what that means."

Corbin knew what it meant. The stage robberies had been so frequent of late that there had been a talk of an uprising of the Vigilantes; a thing he feared far more than he did courts and officials. A court might be bribed; but a mob was a senseless, headstrong thing, which was never yet known to be swerved by such means.

"That's just what I'll do if you don't sign this paper."

"You'll give me a chance to get out of town, before springing the thing?"

"Abundant chance!"

A sly, crafty expression was coming into the gambler's eyes.

"All right, then, I'll do it! Just hold the thing back till I can get a good start. Then, you can open on Beeson, for all I care!"

Teamster Tom pushed the paper toward him, still suspiciously watching him.

There was a pen and ink on the table; and Corbin, after glancing over the writing for a few seconds, wrote his name in a bold and legible hand at the bottom.

"There you are," he said, shoving the paper back. "I hate to do it; but a fellow must, when the devil drives."

Teamster Tom pocketed the paper with a great deal of satisfaction; then arose and cautiously backed toward the door.

"I'll give you twelve hours to get out of the town," pulling the door open as he spoke the words. "That'll be plenty of time. If you're here after that, it will be your own lookout."

He backed through the door, stepped quickly into the corridor, and hurried with all speed down the stairway.

CHAPTER XVII.

WHAT MIGHT HAVE BEEN EXPECTED.

TEAMSTER TOM was not certain that the confession he had secured would answer as evidence in a court of justice; but he was nevertheless confident that by a skillful use of it he could do Lawrence Beeson incalculable damage, if not ruin him.

The stage for Shoshone had gone, when he regained the street; and there was nothing left for him to do but to remain in Deadwood until the time for the next out-going stage, or procure a horse and proceed by means of it to Shoshone.

He decided to wait for the next stage, which usually left shortly after dark. The travel between Shoshone and Deadwood had become so great, now, that two round trips were made every twenty-four hours, one in the daytime and the other at night.

A number of business visits which he desired to make aided in inducing him to this conclusion; and with a mind filled with his schemes against Lawrence Beeson, he went about the affairs that required his attention.

Teamster Tom in turning detective had many things yet to learn. The first of these was that he was only an amateur in experience, and that it required a craft of which he was hardly yet master to cope with the men with whom he was battling. But he had courage and resolution, which are great things in themselves; and by their aid, in spite of the failures he was to be subjected to, he was destined to win in the end.

Having accomplished the business part of his work, and with nothing now to do but to think and plan, he returned to the vicinity of the gambling-house. He had no well-defined object in view in so doing; only a desire to know if Tobe Corbin still lingered about the place.

Corbin was nowhere to be seen; and, concluding the gambler had already left the town, Teamster Tom made his way back to his hotel, where he remained until near the hour of the stage's departure.

He got his supper at the hotel, paid his bill, and took his way to the stage office.

CHAPTER XVIII.

LOVE'S PROMPTINGS.

This was on one of the back streets; and as he strode sturdily along, thinking of the sensation the confession would create in Shoshone, he was set on by three or four ruffians, who leaped out at him from the darkness of an alley.

So suddenly did they appear that he was not given time for flight; and so faced toward them and reached for his revolver.

Even then, it did not occur to him that these were friends of Tobe Corbin's, who had been posted there to waylay him. He supposed they were a gang of foot-pads after his purse.

Deadwood was full of these desperate characters at the time, and scarcely a night passed but some citizen or stranger was knocked down and robbed.

Teamster Tom was not given time to use his revolver. Before he could get it out of his pocket, one of the ruffians struck him a blow that bewildered and staggered him; and then the others leaped on him and bore him irresistibly to the earth.

He struggled frantically to rise; but the only result of his effort was a shower of blows and kicks that speedily reduced him to insensibility.

It was almost midnight when he came out of his unconscious state; and then he found himself lying on his back in the dark and filthy alley, with a throbbing pain in his head, and every bone in his body aching in unison. He was so stiff he could hardly move, and when he endeavored to call out to a belated passer-by, the words seemed to stick in his throat.

With much difficulty and pain he dragged himself to the street, where he remained in an exhausted and helpless state until a policeman, passing along his beat, saw him.

"Been slugged, eh?" the policeman questioned, stooping over him. "The thieves seem to be getting bolder than ever."

With that, he gave a rat-tat-tat with his club on the pavement, thus summoning some brother policeman to his assistance; and then a patrol wagon was brought, and in it Teamster Tom was conveyed to a hospital.

He was in so weak and feverish a state, and so thoroughly used up by his terrible experience, that for a time he could give no connected account of what had befallen him.

However, by morning he was better—having rallied under the skillful treatment of the nurses; and then related the occurrences of the night, so far as he knew them.

"Let me have my clothing," he requested.

When he felt through the pockets, a look of astonishment came to him. Not only was his purse gone; but the confession he had extracted from Tobe Corbin.

"This was more than robbery," he said. "Will you please send for the marshal of the town?"

The marshal came, in the course of half an hour; and then Teamster Tom exhibited his rifled pockets.

"I want you to put your men on the track of a gambler named Tobe Corbin. You know Corbin?"

"Yes, I know him. You think he had a hand in this, eh?"

Teamster Tom gave his reasons for so thinking.

The marshal sat for a moment, dumb with astonishment.

"I reckon, now, you're not mistaken about Lawrence Beeson?"

"Not a bit of it!" in most emphatic tones. "When I see and hear a thing, I know it as well as the next man. I saw and I heard these things with my own eyes and ears."

The marshal walked up and down the room with his hands in his pockets, and whistled his astonishment.

"This is all on the quiet," Teamster Tom explained. "I don't want a breath of it to get to Beeson. What I do want is for you to help me in my efforts to round him up."

It was lucky for Teamster Tom that the marshal happened to be an acquaintance. Otherwise, that officer might not have believed him, or would have thought him flighty from his injuries. But the marshal knew Teamster Tom of old, and knew him as a man whose statements could be relied on.

"I presume the first thing to be done is to see if we can find Corbin. The chances are about ten to one that he has left Deadwood, and that he won't come back in a hurry."

"If I've driven him out of the town, I'll have the satisfaction, then, of knowing I've done some good."

"A good thing for Deadwood, yes; for he's a hard citizen. But I don't reckon the people of the camp he emigrates to will present you with a vote of thanks!"

"I'll have him pulled, if he's in town. I think it more likely, though, that he's cut out for some secret hiding-place, where we may expect him to remain for a time. Of course he'll inform Beeson of what has happened; and that will be bad! But I'll help you all I can. There's one thing, though: You must keep your weather eye open when you leave here. Tobe Corbin is a desperate scoundrel; and Beeson, if he herds with that road-agent gang, can't be any better. They are sure to do you up, if they get the chance. Don't give them the chance!"

As the marshal feared, Tobe Corbin was not to be found at the gambling-house, nor anywhere in Deadwood. No one appeared to know where he was; and to all seeming, he had as mysteriously vanished as if he had taken unto himself wings and flown away. He had not been seen to leave on any of the out-going stages, so that it was certain, if he were still in town, he was in hiding.

All this the marshal communicated to Teamster Tom; and, although it was what the latter expected, its influence was so depressing that not even the marshal's promises to help him in every way possible, could raise his sinking spirits.

Teamster Tom felt, and felt rightly, that he had made a fool of himself. He recalled the words uttered by Corbin to Beeson in the Crow's Nest, to the effect that hindsight was a good deal better than foresight; and, applying the sentiment to himself, cursed himself bitterly for his supreme idiocy.

Not the least depressing circumstance was that he was forced by his injuries to remain in bed in the hospital. He wanted to be up; to be doing something. What he could have done did not appear clear, but the inactivity was unendurable at that time.

His thoughts were given a new turn by the approach of one of the nurses, who held a visiting-card in her hand.

"There's a lady in waiting, who would like to see you."

"A lady?"

Teamster Tom stared.

He took the card, however, and glanced at the name, and when he had done so, flushed strangely, and seemed to be much affected.

The card bore the name of Fawnie Lawrence.

Teamster Tom did not know she was in Deadwood; but even if he had known it, he would not have expected a visit from her.

Fawnie Lawrence had come up on the stage that morning, for the purpose of staying a few days with some former neighbors. She had been induced to this more by a desire to get away from Shoshone, and so escape the hated companionship of Lawrence Beeson and Laura Rudiger than by anything else.

In that morning's paper she had seen an account of the attack made on Teamster Tom by footpads, as they were supposed by the reporters to be, and of his conveyance to the hospital, where he was said to be lying in a very precarious state.

She did not know how serious might be his injuries, nor how near to death's door he might be, for the report was somewhat sensational and exaggerated. And in this uncertainty she had cast her scruples to the wind, and had come down to see him.

Fawnie Lawrence had made most earnest endeavor to root out from her heart the deep love which had grown up there for this man. She had inflicted on herself much suffering in this effort, but had practically succeeded in doing nothing else. The love was too strong to be crushed. It had become a part of her nature; and though she felt that Teamster Tom was unworthy of it, and that he could never be anything more to her than he was, she knew this hopeless love was there to remain.

She was surprised, when conducted into the apartment occupied by Teamster Tom, to discover that he was not as seriously injured as the newspapers had represented. In fact he appeared to be getting on famously; and the smile with which he greeted her showed that he was far from being in a dangerous condition.

Fawnie Lawrence would have been glad to beat a retreat on making this discovery; but it was too late for that; and so she sunk confusedly into a chair near the bedside; and ventured to ask him in the timidiest voice, how he was feeling.

"A great deal better than a few hours ago!" he hastened to assure her.

"The papers stated that you were not expected to live," she faltered.

He was feasting his eyes on the beauty of her face.

"Then, I'm much obliged to the papers; for I feel pretty sure that to that statement I am indebted for this visit. Is it not so?"

She did not reply at once in words, but her manner evinced he had guessed correctly.

"It is so," she confessed, after some hesitation.

Miss Lawrence's ingenuousness was one of her most marked traits. She abhorred a falsehood. She would rather confess herself wrong, or indiscreet, or foolish, than to hide any of these things by even the whitest of lies. It was her innate purity which caused her to so shrink from the contemplation of anything that seemed criminal. Because of this, the offense with which she charged Teamster Tom was one which could never be condoned nor forgiven. She did not attempt to make herself think it was not one of the foulest and blackest of crimes.

And yet, so strange a thing is human nature—especially the human nature of a woman in

love—that her heart still went out to Teamster Tom in a way that bewildered and sometimes terrified her.

"When did you reach Deadwood?" was his further question.

"I came in on the last stage. I wanted to visit the Mertons a few days, and to call on some other of my Deadwood friends. That's how I happen to be in the town."

"I could bless any chance that brought you here!" with a sudden burst of feeling, and looking intently at her. "I suppose I ought even to thank the man who whacked me on the head with the sand-bag last night. For I have been wanting to see you for a long time, and haven't known how to bring it about."

There was a slight flush on her cheeks, but otherwise, she was outwardly composed.

He waited for her to reply; but as she did not, continued:

"Yes; I've wanted to see you ever since the trial. I have wanted to assure you, on my word of honor, that you were wholly mistaken in thinking the road-agent's face which you saw was my face."

She started as if she had some thought of withdrawing, for to her it was a disagreeable and undesirable subject. But he stayed her with his words.

"You must believe me!" stretching out a hand, appealingly. "I can't have you think such evil things of me. As I hope for forgiveness hereafter for the sins I have done here, I declare to you that I was not that man! I was the victim of a plot, Miss Lawrence; and you were the victim of a deception. I have no doubt you thought you saw me; but I assure you, positively, you did not. There was a man there disguised to look like me, but it was not me!"

He felt that this had a false sound, and could not hope she would believe it. He saw she was touched, but she did not lift her face to him as if she were convinced.

She had put up her hands; and thus she sat, with a choking lump in her throat and unbidden tears in her eyes.

"You will not believe me!" with almost a despairing wail. "Is there anything, Miss Lawrence, that I can say or do to convince you of your error? My God! I would willingly do anything to disabuse you of that idea!"

His own strong frame was quivering, while his face had a pleading, heart-broken expression resting upon it.

"I will not say that I don't believe you," she said very quietly, looking at him again, after having removed the traces of her tears.

"Your manner says it, if your words do not. But I am innocent, Fawnie! Innocent of that charge!"

It was not unintentionally that he addressed her by her first name; and it pleased him to see she did not appear to resent it.

While making his positive denials, he feared to bring in the name of Lawrence Beeson. His charges against Beeson would necessarily have been very shocking to her, and he was not sure that it would be advisable to venture at all on the subject. It did not seem likely he could make her believe in Beeson's guilt, or that he had fallen into a snare of Beeson's setting.

"You may believe me innocent or not," very lowly and very earnestly. "I see that I am unable to clear myself in your eyes. But there is one thing, Fawnie!—pardon me for so addressing you!—you can't prevent me from loving you! You cannot prevent me from loving you; a thing I have done almost since we first met. I may never have another opportunity to say this; and am resolved to say it, now, though I know it can avail me nothing."

She half arose from her chair, but sunk back, quivering slightly. She had covered her face again; and he saw, by a chance movement of the hand, that she was weeping. Weeping hot, scalding tears!

In the months gone by, when he had feared to approach her on the subject of his love, it was because of his poverty. He had wealth, now, and a position in the world—but a greater barrier had arisen.

"You have nothing to say?" he questioned, touched by the sight of her tears.

"Nothing!" she said, rising as if to depart.

"I am sorry you have said this."

"You are sorry you came here?"

"Almost!"

Her lips were white and trembling; but she gave him a steady, though mournful, look.

"I am glad you came. It gave me an opportunity to say this, and to declare my innocence. I don't expect you to return my love, Fawnie!—not while you think me guilty of that crime. Perhaps I can some day so prove my innocence that even you will be convinced. When that time comes—"

He did not complete the sentence, seeing how his words pained her.

"Allow me to say good-by, and to wish you well!" extending her hand to him timidly.

He took it, and with a boldness that surprised him, pressed it to his lips.

"Good-by!" he whispered.

Then she turned and left the room.

CHAPTER XIX.

BEESON'S ALARM.

LAWRENCE BEESON was in a state of alarm. He had received a letter from Tobe Corbin, telling of what had occurred in Deadwood, and which was filled with maledictions against Teamster Tom, and with many words of warning to Beeson.

The letter had been brought up by the office boy, with other mail, and Beeson, seeing that it was from Corbin, had read it among the first.

His face paled as he acquainted himself with its contents. The discovery of the robber rendezvous by Teamster Tom was an unlooked-for thing.

The most pleasing part of the letter, and the only part from which he was able to glean any satisfaction, was that which told of the way Laidlaw had been "done up" by Corbin's bruisers.

"It's a great pity they didn't kill him!" he growled. "They'd have done it, too, if I'd been directing them. Corbin's a fool to let him get off that way!"

He crumpled the letter in his hand; then paced up and down the room with every indication of nervous fear.

Finally he stopped; and approaching the window, tore the letter into infinitesimal bits, which he tossed to the winds.

"Why didn't Corbin put him out of the way while he had the chance?" returning to his seat and frowning at the heap of unread letters. "Because he's a fool! I suppose he was afraid to. Some men never learn anything. It would have been a deal safer than to have him go free with that story to tell!"

It was plain to Beeson that something would have to be done to prevent the exposure which he so greatly feared. He did not know just what kind of evidence Teamster Tom might have gathered. For all he knew to the contrary, it might be of a character to consign him to a prison.

He cursed himself for having entered into league with the road-agents, of whom Corbin was the real head. His conscience did not trouble him on that score. What he dreaded was being found out!

The nefarious work had had a promising aspect as presented by Corbin, but it had brought Beeson more annoyance and worry than it had wealth.

Beeson's finances were not in a flourishing state, though he was carrying matters so gayly. His bills were innumerable and pressing. The holding up of the stages had been entered on for the funds to be obtained thereby. But the band was a large one; and when the spoils were divided, each man's share was not great.

The desire to get money was not what first caused him to league himself with Tobe Corbin, as the reader has seen. It was his wish to strike a stunning blow at Teamster Tom.

In this effort, Corbin had stood by him and had aided him all in his power. It was Corbin's brain which had planned the stage scheme.

But, now, Corbin stated in this letter that he felt it prudent to lay low for awhile; and this was an annoying thing to Beeson, who felt that he needed the gambler's keen wits more now than at any other period.

There was nothing to prevent Corbin from hiding in the hills for an indefinite time and herding there with the desperate men who were his tools. But for Beeson no such thing was possible. He had his interests at Shoshone. Interests which could not be disposed of at a moment's notice, and whose supervision could not readily be delegated to others.

Corbin might fly from the wrath which seemed impending, but Beeson knew he must stay and face it.

His thoughts began to take definite shape as he sat there, staring at the heap of letters not one of which he saw; and as the idea was promising, and he began to hammer it into form, he got up and recommenced his restless walking.

Corbin had told him to address such communications as he might desire to make to him, under cover of the name of a mutual friend in Deadwood.

"I must find out what stage Laidlaw is to return in," Beeson's thoughts ran. "I wonder, now, if Corbin can post me as to that? If he can't, I presume this other fellow can."

"Even if he can't tell until the very moment of the starting of the stage, he can telegraph me then, and that will give me plenty of time. I do hope he'll come down in one of the night stages. But I'll make a try of the thing, even if it's in broad day!"

When he had thus taken counsel with himself, he put on his hat and went out into the street, being desirous of seeing Smith Faggett, for a new thought had come to him.

Faggett was not engaged in any line of work at that time, having returned somewhat to his gambling and confidence tricks after his discharge from the service of Teamster Tom.

Hence, Beeson did not know just where to look for him. But a little inquiry showed that Smith Faggett had last been seen taking his breakfast at Mrs. Partridge's restaurant; and toward that establishment Beeson bent his way.

He found Faggett comfortably wiping his lips,

after having disposed of an agreeable meal, removing his handkerchief occasionally to apply a wooden toothpick. Faggett was alone at the table.

He looked up quickly, when he saw Beeson enter and caught the furtive expression on his face.

There was no love lost between these men; though—a fact which has not heretofore been revealed—both were members of the same robber organization. Consequently the news which had so stirred Beeson promised to be of equal interest to Smith Faggett; and, by the same reasoning, it was likely Faggett would earnestly second Beeson in any plan which promised to dispose of Teamster Tom.

"Something up, eh?" Faggett questioned, throwing away the toothpick and getting up from the table.

Beeson did not reply; but led the way to one of the little side rooms prepared for the accommodation of small parties, or families who wished to take their meals alone.

This room seemed quite secluded, and Beeson felt safe to speak there of things on his mind.

Before speaking, however, he took a careful survey of the passages leading to the apartment.

"I've got bad news. I had a letter from Corbin this morning, which I thought best to destroy, to keep it from falling into unfriendly hands, and in it Corbin tells a startling story. A part of it, I presume, will be corroborated by the Deadwood dailies. They're out, now; but we won't get them till the next stage."

Faggett's surprise and uneasiness were apparent; and they increased rather than diminished when Beeson proceeded to unfold the nature of Corbin's communication.

"Now, I've got a plan," Beeson said, when he had finished, speaking slowly and thoughtfully.

"I want to ask you what you think about it; and if you think it's the safest and best thing to do, I want you to help me to carry it out. Our interests are one in this matter, Faggett, and we've got to stand by each other!"

"Or fall with each other!" sententiously.

"You're right in that! If we don't stand together, we're certain to fall together."

"Corbin says Laidlaw's hurt pretty bad, but that there ain't any doubt he will be around and ready for devilment in a week or so. Corbin thinks, though, that he's drawn his teeth and clipped his nails. For myself, I don't think any such thing; and I doubt if Corbin thinks it. If he did, he wouldn't deem it necessary to go in to hiding."

"Likely Corbin thinks *he's* safe; but what about us? There's where the shoe tightens. We can't run away;—at least I can't. And so we've got to do something else."

Beeson stopped as if for the purpose of giving his companion time to digest all he had said; then he went on:

"Laidlaw's got to return to Shoshone. That's one point. He'll either come on the stage or on horseback. We must find out, when the time comes, and his hour of starting. Then we must make arrangements to waylay him."

He did not complete the murderous thought that was in his mind, but Smith Faggett read it quite as well in his eyes.

"I guess I know what you mean. But, truthfully, I'm afraid of it!"

Beeson was disappointed.

"It's the safest thing we can do."

"For you, yes; likely it is. But not for me."

"What would you do?" Beeson snarled.

"Now, look here, Beeson! The chances are that in the game you propose, somebody will get killed. You expect that, of course. But it may not be the man you are hoping it will be; and I say frankly that should he go under, there's mighty big odds that he'll have company. For myself, I don't care to be that company!"

"I didn't know you were a coward, Faggett, with ineffable scorn."

"Nor am I. I'm only prudent."

"And would let him return and do his worst, would you?"

"And probably a bit selfish!" continuing his first thought. "It strikes me, Beeson, that I'm not the man Laidlaw is after. He's after you, probably; but I don't think he'll bother his head about me."

"And this is as far as our sworn brotherhood goes, eh?" hotly. "I might have known as much."

"I think you'd feel very much as I do, if you were situated the same. I expect to get married in a short time, and I don't desire to make of my expectant wife a widow before she's a bride."

Beeson turned from him with disgust and stared moodily at the floor.

"Well, I expect to carry out my scheme, whether you assist or not!"

"I'm willing to assist in any way I can with safety; but I'm not willing to run the risk of getting a bullet in the hold-up of the stage."

"He may not come in the stage," Beeson objected.

As Faggett made no reply to this, Beeson continued his moody staring at the floor.

"I reckon you can help me at Deadwood," he said, finally. "There won't be any danger there."

Faggett maintained his silence.

"There'll have to be some one there to watch him, and to notify me how and when he starts. Will you do that?"

"Most cheerfully, my dear Beeson. I've been longing to see the boys up there, and that will give me the opportunity."

"I'll have to have somebody to look after that, since Corbin has abandoned the field."

"Well, I'll accept the commission."

"When can you go? At once?"

He had arisen, deeming the conference at an end, and was moving toward the door.

"On the next stage," said Faggett, also getting out of his chair.

"All right! In the mean time I'll prepare a cipher, so that you can telegraph me without any danger of making the thing known."

They left the room together; and when the street was gained, separated, each going his own way.

CHAPTER XX.

MARBURY'S COUNTER PLOT.

THE stage from Deadwood to Shoshone came to a halt, on a certain dark night, at the hail of a man from the side of the trail.

It was not a "hold-up." The man who had hailed was Joe Marbury.

Within the stage was Teamster Tom and a number of armed men; who, however, to all outward seeming, were only passengers on business or pleasure bent.

As the stage came to a full stop, with the grinding of the brake on the wheels, Teamster Tom leaped out and addressed Marbury:

"So you're here? Is there any news from below?"

"Nothin' more than what I writ ye. I don't doubt they're a-layin' fer ye somewhurs along the trail, though I don't just know the p'int."

With this he mounted to the driver's seat, which had been vacated for him, and took up the reins, while Teamster Tom and the driver climbed into the coach with the armed guards.

All of which, perhaps, needs an elucidation.

Beeson and Faggett had overreached themselves somewhat, when they held that conference in the little room of the restaurant.

Mrs. Partridge had seen Beeson enter, and had watched him retire to this room with Faggett. A certain air of mystery about their movements attracted her attention.

Being in full possession of Jed Marbury's confidence, she knew a great many things concerning these men and their enmity and opposition to Teamster Tom. She knew what had befallen Tom in Deadwood, for one of Marbury's friends had written him about it.

Hence, she concluded that Beeson and Faggett would have something to say on the subject; and with her curiosity aroused, and burning with a desire to be of service to Marbury and Laidlaw, she tip-toed cautiously toward the small room which the plotters had entered.

She did not try to make herself believe it was precisely the proper thing to do; but she was able to excuse herself with weighty reasons.

She was not an eavesdropper by nature or desire; and so felt decidedly guilty, as she crouched in an adjoining apartment and applied an ear to the dividing wall. She was not without a nervous fear, either, feeling that it would be a dreadful thing to be discovered in that position.

She felt she had acted the part of wisdom, when the words of the conversation reached her. What she heard told her that Beeson had deadly intent against Teamster Tom. By thus overhearing his scheme she might, through Marbury's aid, be able to overthrow it.

She did not dare remain until the talk was concluded; but as soon as she had gained sufficient knowledge to understand what they were talking of, she crept back to her place behind the restaurant counter; and was there, ready to greet them with hypocritical smiles, when they passed out.

They had no sooner departed, than she called one of the girls to take her place, and proceeded to the office of the Dead Man's Mine to acquaint Marbury with her astounding discovery.

"I can't say that I'm surprised!" Marbury asserted, his looks belying his words. "The question now is, what to do?"

"Well, I am!" was her horrified declaration, as she folded her hands in her lap. "I'm that surprised that I don't know whether I'm standin' on my head or on my heels. Why, they mean to kill him, Jed!"

"Yes; I reckon they do. I wouldn't put it past 'em. It wouldn't be the fust man they've killed, either, accordin' to my ideas."

Mrs. Partridge's face took on a look of horror.

"Why, Jed!"

"I've said it, and I'll stick to it!" with an impressive wave of his head. "Not the fust, by a dog-goned sight! You don't know them men, Mrs. Partridge."

"No, I low I don't. I'm sure I don't. You could have knocked me down with a feather when I heard what they was talkin' about."

"The thing to do, now, is to try to head 'em off!"

"I'll tell ye! I can have Tom come down in the stage, and so arrange it that we can trap an' capture every one of 'em. Dog-gone me, it can

be done, an' I'll do it! Jennie, you're a jewel! You're a hummin'-bird with rainbow wings! Dog-gone me! You're the smartest woman in the Black Hills!"

"Don't!" she cried, as he drew her toward him and seemed on the point of hugging and kissing her in the very rapture of his delight.

"Well, if you mean it, I won't, then. But I'm goin' to write to Teamster Tom this very mornin' an' tell him jist what you heared, an' of how I think we kin trap 'em!"

This was what he did; and Laidlaw received his letter in that day's mail.

The fidelity of these friends at Shoshone was pleasing to Laidlaw, and it strengthened him to know that he had such followers.

The matter presented by Jed's letter was of the most serious. It proved the desperation of Lawrence Beeson, and revealed something of the peril that would thenceforth shadow Laidlaw. Beeson had, as Teamster Tom believed, killed Jim Ross, and now meant to kill him.

But as for that, he told himself he would have something to say about it. He was safe while he remained at the hospital, and when able to leave it he would take every precaution.

Jed suggested in the letter that it might be possible to corral Beeson and his friends at the moment of the attempted hold-up. This could only be done, however, by knowing just where the hold-up would take place.

He thought for a great while on the subject, and then wrote Jed a letter, which he gave to an attendant, with instructions to have it posted immediately.

In this letter he urged Jed to keep close watch on the movements of Beeson and Faggett, and above all things to keep him posted, using the wire if necessary.

He assured Jed of the great obligations under which he had been placed by the communication, and said that when he returned in the stage he would bring with him a small company of armed men. The other details he would have to ask Jed to look after.

Marbury found it impossible to learn where the holding-up of the stage was to occur; and so on the night of the stage's departure from Deadwood, he slipped quietly out of Shoshone, and, mounted on a fast horse, rode by a circuitous route to intercept Teamster Tom, which, as we have seen, he did.

The stage trail was lonely and deserted, and the shadows hung heavily, as Marbury, seated in the driver's place, urged the horses onward through the night.

Every faculty was strained to the utmost. Nothing could be heard but the clatter of the horses' hoofs, the grinding and rumbling of the wheels, and the wind that moaned through the pine boughs.

It was a night for the consummation of dark deeds!—such a night as Lawrence Beeson would no doubt have selected for the execution of his plot, if he had been delegated the choosing.

Marbury's eyes constantly searched the winding path in front of him; but more than three miles had been passed over, and they were nearing Shoshone, before his visual orbs rested on the sight they sought.

That was a man standing in the center of the trail, road-agent fashion, with uplifted rifle.

Marbury could not make out his features, and could only dimly see his form, but he pulled heavily in on the reins and brought the stage to a stop before the man had time to formulate the command to halt.

As the horses were drawn down to a walk, and then to a full stand, Beeson's men swarmed forward, for the purpose of surrounding the vehicle, believing that Teamster Tom would fall an easy prey.

But they were doomed to a great surprise. The doors of the coach were thrown open and the armed guard poured out, firing at the advancing ruffians even as they did so. One man among the latter was seen to throw up his arms and tumble heavily to the ground.

The surprise was complete. This unexpected show of resistance demoralized Beeson's forces; and after a wild volley, that did no injury, they essayed to beat a retreat and extricate themselves from the trap into which they saw they had run.

It was Teamster Tom's wish to capture Beeson, if nothing else was done; and with this end in view, he dashed recklessly toward the bewildered road-agents, leading the advance of his men.

The intense gloom prevailing made it impossible for him to recognize Beeson; and the retreat of the ruffians was conducted with such precipitateness that he was foiled.

The robbers escaped, with the exception of the one who was left lying in the trail; and he, when approached, was seen to be dead.

Teamster Tom, aided by the information and assistance given by Marbury, had succeeded in defeating the plan aimed at his life; but he had failed to capture the arch conspirator.

There was some little satisfaction in knowing that one of the murderous villains had fallen a victim to his own criminal attempt; and to this satisfaction was added surprise, when it was seen that he was a man well known in Shoshone.

Teamster Tom saw, however, that this fact would be of no use in any effort he might make to fix the crime on Lawrence Beeson.

The body was taken into the coach; which continued its way, without further molestation, to Shoshone.

Teamster Tom fully expected to see Beeson there in the midst of his friends, with a look of hypocritical and oily innocence on his face. But Beeson was not there. Neither did he come in during the hours of the night, nor on the following day; and then a report was circulated that he had departed for Pierre on a business trip.

Laidlaw and Marbury, in talking this over in the seclusion of the former's office, decided that it was a lie manufactured for this especial occasion; and, believing it a falsehood, the conclusion was reached that Beeson had been wounded in the fight, and would no doubt remain in hiding until he had sufficiently recovered to return without his injuries attracting notice.

CHAPTER XXI.

BEESON'S WHEREABOUTS.

In their suppositions, Teamster Tom and Marbury were to some extent right.

Lawrence Beeson had been wounded in the fight, though not to any serious degree. His hurt was sufficient, however, to make him wish to keep away from Shoshone; well knowing that to return to that place in a wounded condition would be to lay himself open to the gravest suspicion.

He would be forced to make awkward explanations, which might not be satisfactory and convincing, and his enemies would be given a chance to whisper dark things.

For these reasons Lawrence Beeson betook himself with all speed to Deadwood; and from thence, after a little delay, to Hot Springs.

In this latter journey he was accompanied by Fawnie Lawrence, who, a few days before, had written him that she meant to make another trip to her claim.

The injury which Beeson had received was a shot in the fleshy part of the leg. He had bound it up soon after receiving it, and had had it attended to at Deadwood by a member of the robber band, fearing to go to any regular physician.

The wound was not of a dangerous character; and although he suffered much inconvenience and pain from it, he was able to walk with only a slight limp; and in the blandest way explained to any questioner that he was suffering from a fall, in which he had sprained his knee.

Beeson could lie with smooth glibness; and, as no one ever thought of questioning the statement he got along very well.

He did not tarry long in Deadwood. People from Shoshone were likely to make their appearance there at any time.

He read with avidity the accounts of the fight as given in the Deadwood dailies. He was pleased to learn from these that no inkling of the truth had come to the reporters. The affair was supposed to be an ordinary attempt at robbery, in which the villains had been repulsed. The reports were in a high degree sensational, and the descriptions of the fight and of the defeat of the robbers were written up in a very thrilling and taking way, the reporters having got most of their "facts" out of their own imaginations.

He found that Fawnie Lawrence was about ready with her preparations for the trip to Hot Springs and her claim. The barometer of his feelings fell several degrees, however, when he learned that she was to be accompanied by several ladies of Deadwood.

These ladies had taken claims in the vicinity of Fawnie's; and so, a little party had been made up, which promised to make of the visit an occasion of jollity. It was true, their claims were located considerable distances apart, but they intended to overcome this disadvantage by frequent visits to each other, and by little picnicking excursions.

If Beeson was displeased to learn of this, Fawnie was much more than displeased when Beeson called on her and spoke of his desire to accompany her to the Springs. This proposed introduction of a serpent into their contemplated Eden quite dampened her ardor.

Beeson saw the look of disappointment; but was resolved to go along, nevertheless. He must go somewhere, until such a time as he felt he could return in safety to Shoshone; and a trip with Fawnie to her claim was the most plausible thing he could think of.

"You don't want me to go along?" he questioned, with an impatient frown. "That seems a little ungrateful, Fawnie! I don't see why you should object to it. I want a little outing; and to enjoy it, I've got to get away from Shoshone and from Deadwood. If I don't, people will be running to me all the time on business matters, and will give me no rest."

He did look worn and white; and Fawnie Lawrence, noting this, could not doubt that his business affairs were pressing too hard on him. She could sympathize with him in his desire to get away from the eternal roar and

clamor of business; but she did wish he had chosen some other route, and other company.

Her intense dislike for him was so great she could not help revealing it in her expressive countenance. Yet she was under many obligations to him. This last was a fact she could not close her eyes to. He had been disagreeable in many ways, had troubled her with his protestations of love, and requests for her to marry him; but his house was her home, and almost since her earliest recollection he had treated her with brotherly kindness.

"I suppose you'll have to go along, if you wish to," she returned, confusedly eying the floor.

"I do wish to!"

"Then, I must beg of you that you do not trouble me with such talk as you have been using toward me lately."

"This is the unkindest cut of all!" in mock heroic.

"I mean it!" very decidedly.

"I'll be as good as I know how," he promised.

"I'll try not to annoy you. I'm sure I could accomplish that if you would only quit looking so charming."

She began a protest.

"Now, I won't say another word," rising. "You intend to start this afternoon, I believe you said?"

She gave an affirmative answer.

"Very well, then; I'll be ready. You ladies need a gentleman escort, anyway, and ought to be glad that I've offered my services. If you wish it, Fawnie, and there's another lady in the party pretty enough to attract my fancy, I'll not say a word to you on the journey."

Her look was not pleasant; and seeing she did not relish this chaff, he took his departure for the purpose of making arrangements for accompanying her.

He did not see her again until he called to conduct her to the stage office. Little was said as they took their way thither, Miss Lawrence not being in a mood to encourage conversation.

They found the other members of the party there; and in a short time were rumbling over the southern trail in the big coach.

During the interval of waiting, Lawrence Beeson had kept himself well secluded from the gaze of the citizens of Deadwood. Too many of these knew him, and he did not wish his comings and goings observed or discussed. The hours of idleness were spent in a back room at the gambling house patronized by Tobe Corbin, and in the company of some of Corbin's friends. Corbin was out of town.

In spite of the shadow cast on her spirits by Beeson's presence, it was impossible for Fawnie Lawrence to remain in a dull and discomforting state in the company of the lively young ladies who constituted the party. They were full of talk, of jest and song; and so beguiled the hours that these slipped away almost unheeded.

At Buffalo Gap another stage was taken for Hot Springs, only a few miles away; and at this latter place ponies and buggies were procured for the continuation of the journey.

This holiday trip seemed destined to furnish a tragedy; for while on the way to their claims, a prairie fire, started in some unknown manner, flamed across their pathway and toward them, driven by a fierce wind.

The fright of the ladies was marked, when they beheld this, as well it might be. Usually such fires contain few elements of peril, but here the grass was high; and the flames not only threatened to block their further progress, but to prevent their return.

Beeson was experienced in such things; and having quieted their fears as well as he could, he made known to them what was necessary to be done.

The buggies and animals were then grouped together on a rocky point where the grass was thinnest; and Beeson, advancing a few feet, set fire to the nearest tuft.

Fanned by the winds, the blaze sprung up; and soon a wall of fire rushed to leeward with a hissing and crackling sound, devouring the pasture like some great, hungry monster.

For a time the heat and smoke were almost insupportable. This did not last long, however; and then the thankful little party saw before them a blackened track in which they could drive with perfect safety.

The fire, started by Beeson, ate a wider and still wider swath as it forged onward; this blackened and heated path forming, as it were, a secure harbor against the waves of flame that were rolling toward them.

It was a very unpleasant place to be in, however. Many of the grass-tufts were still burning, sending up a disagreeably-pungent smoke, together with a heat that was all too fervent. And the winds, catching up the black ashes, hurled them in the clouds that were blinding; and not only blinding, but harmful to the complexion and dresses of the women.

But there was no help for this; and it was such a relief to feel that they were safe from the fire, that they even joked and laughed over these discomforts, making nothing of them.

It was a grand sight to sit there, secure from all harm, and watch the fiery billows rise and

fall, like the surges on the bosom of a storm-tossed sea. It was sublimely grand and impressive. A sight never to be forgotten.

And when the two opposing walls of flame drew near to each other, and with gigantic leaps seemed to rush into each other's arms, as if for a mighty wrestling match, the little party sat spell-bound and awe-stricken. Great columns of fire and smoke and sparks were flung upward, as if from the heart of a caldron, while the waves of flame towered skyward; and then they fell, hissing and sputtering, as if angry at their defeat and grumbling at the manner in which they had been cheated of their expected prey.

Beeson and his companions were detained at that point nearly an hour before the earth cooled enough to allow them to proceed on their way. Then they drove through a ghastly, ebon-hued desert, strewn with ashes and smoldering fire-spots, the whole presenting a strange and marked contrast to the route already traversed.

Beeson and Fawnie led the advance in their buggy; and as its hood had been raised to protect them from the direct rays of the sun, they were shut off from the view of those following.

Beeson felt that he had acted very heroically and manfully; and did not intend to let the opportunity pass without improving it. Surely, he told himself, he had been raised sufficiently in Fawnie's estimation to make it safe to once more venture on the forbidden subject.

"Fawnie," he began, touching one of her hands with his, as they drove onward, "it seems to me that I have earned the right to address you again by what I did this afternoon. You and your friends would have been in a ticklish position but for me."

She did not reply in words, but her manner told him she would prefer to have him talk of something else.

"Don't you think so?"

"It was a dreadful fire!" and she shuddered.

"I don't think I ever saw a worse. But we got through it all right, and for that, you have me to thank."

"I do thank you most sincerely! We were so ignorant, I don't know what we should have done but for you."

He smiled in a self-congratulatory way. These were the kind of words he liked to hear.

"Haven't I earned the right to speak to you on that forbidden subject?" he queried. "I know I have."

"I should prefer you to talk about something else," entreatingly. "I am very grateful to you, Mr. Beeson, and always shall be. You have earned the thanks of all of us."

This was not a very gracious assent; but Beeson felt he ought to be thankful for small favors; and so he continued, unabashed:

"When I spoke to you of my love for you, Fawnie, at Shoshone, you did not give me much encouragement. It was not what I hoped for, and not what I thought I had a right to expect. And now I tell you again that I love you as I never loved any other woman; and once more ask you the old, old question: Will you be my wife?"

"I cannot!" she cried, shrinking from him.

"You cannot?" striving to control the harshness in his tones. "Why? You have some reason?"

She did not answer.

"I think I know why!" and there was a serpent-like hiss in his utterance of these words.

She looked at him in a startled way.

"I think I know why! It's because you care for that low-lived sneak, Tom Laidlaw!"

She could not repress a start, which he interpreted into an admission of the truth of the accusation.

"You know he is a scoundrel, Fawnie! The most unmitigated rascal there is in Shoshone. And you've given your heart to him unbidden. Is it because he is my most bitter enemy?"

Her thoughts were in a tumult, to conceal which she hid her face in her hands. She thought she had guarded her secret well. Had it been written on her face? Beeson knew of it; did others of Shoshone?

"You know he is a scoundrel," he continued.

"You cannot deny it."

She shrank and shivered again, as if struck a blow.

"He is a road-agent!"

"I know he is!" she admitted, venturing to look at him, though her eyes were swimming with tears.

"And yet you have dared to love him! Have chosen him in preference to me!"

"I've never said so!"

"Then, tell me that I am mistaken. Tell me you care nothing for him, and that you do love me. At least, promise to give me a chance. Promise to cast him out of your thoughts, and give me a chance."

"I have neither confessions nor promises to make!" she exclaimed, with unutterable bitterness. "And if you're a gentleman, Lawrence, you will not press the subject any further."

There was a desperate, hunted look in her eyes, and Beeson saw that it was the part of

wisdom to drop the subject. That look told him that if he continued to harass her, she would get out of the buggy and seek the protection of her friends.

"Have it your own way!" he said, with angry emphasis, and then for a time drove on in moody silence.

It was mid-afternoon when Fawnie Lawrence's claim was reached.

She had visited it before, and there was a pretension to a house—here called a shack—and a few other evidences of improvement. The fire had not touched that point, and so there was grass for the horses.

Beeson did not tarry there, however. The other ladies were anxious to reach their claims; and as he had volunteered to accompany them, he left Fawnie in charge of her shack and drove away.

Fawnie was to have the use of the buggy during her stay, and it was planned for one of the ladies to return that evening, and remain with her, while Beeson was to go back to Hot Springs.

She came out of the rude house, when they were started, and waved them a farewell with her hand.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE MANIAC'S TERRIBLE DEED.

FAWNIE had preferred to picket out her own horse, and when they were gone she performed this duty. The buggy had been left close to the shack, and she placed the horse only a few yards distant, and where it could be seen through the open doorway. The sight of it kept away the lonesome feeling she so much dreaded.

"I'd much rather have you here than some people I know of," she whispered, looking smilingly at the beast, which lifted its head and gazed at her every time she came to the door. "You're never insolent. Perhaps that's because you can't talk. I wish that some men couldn't talk!"

It seemed a wicked wish, and was recalled by her almost as soon as uttered.

There was a joyous novelty in this claim-life which delighted her; and now, no longer oppressed by Beeson's presence, she began to sing as she set the house in order.

The view from the doorway and from the one little window was not of the widest nor of the grandest. The grass waved in the brisk wind, and further off the dark masses of the Black Hills arose against the sky-line. The country about her was a plain of level land, broken only here and there by a few irregularities and hills.

While thus engaged, she started and shrunk back in sudden alarm. A light footstep had sounded beside the door, and a shadow was thrown across the threshold.

It was the shadow of a man.

When she looked in that direction, which she did instantly, she beheld a strange, tatterdemalion figure; with shrunken cheeks, hollow, deep-set eyes, and thin, bird-like hands.

She uttered a little cry of fright and retreated toward the window.

At this, the stranger entered, grinning impishly and horribly.

"You don't know me," he said, in a high, cracked voice. "You used to know me. But I don't wonder at it, for I'm dead. When I was alive, you rode with me many a time on my stage."

Looking at him more intently, she now recognized him as Broncho Barton, the mad stage-driver.

She had known by his speech and manner that he was insane, even before this recognition.

Her terror passed all bounds. She could not escape by the window, neither could she reach the door; and she stood panting and crouching against the wall, her face as white as a sheet, and her limbs reeling under her.

"What do you want?" she demanded, in a voice so hoarse that it did not seem her own.

"Will you not go away, please?"

"I come over to talk about the fire," not advancing; but leering at her. "'Twas a great fire, wasn't it. It made me feel good just to see it. And when it leaped up and danced and capered, I danced and capered, too. If I had known a fire was such a jolly thing, I'd have had more of them going before this."

She could make no return to this. She seemed to be held powerless by invisible hands.

"I say it was jolly!" he declared, not relishing her silence, and appearing determined to make her agree with him.

When she did not reply, he looked out of the door in a sly way. Then turning to her, said:

"Where's Beeson?"

"He is gone!" she gasped, pointing tremblingly in the direction Beeson had taken.

She hoped this might induce the maniac to go away but she was mistaken. He did not desire to follow Beeson, nor to see him.

"I know he is," he answered with a chuckle. "I seen him go. Him an' a lot of fine ladies from the city!"

"Perhaps Mr. Beeson wants to see you," she urged.

"Well, he won't, then. Ha! ha! ha! He hunted fer me once, but he didn't ketch me. He won't ketch me now, either. He killed me

once, too; but I don't intend to let him kill me ag'in."

Her brain was whirling; and she scarcely heard these strange words.

"I hate Beeson!" he shouted, rising and advancing toward her. "I tell you, I hate him! He killed me! He shot me in the back of the head when I tried to run; and I hate him! I hate him! I hate him! And I hate you, too, because you're akin to him!"

The exclamatory sentences were high-keyed but gurgling, and so fearfully intoned, that Fawnie Lawrence crouched before the man, in a state of abject terror.

She tried to speak, as she stared up at him, but only chattering nonsense came from her lips.

At last she managed to plead:

"Oh, Mr. Barton, please go away! I am your friend. I've always thought well of you!"

For answer he sprang at her like a snarling beast; and with a wild scream, she sunk into a consciousnessless heap.

"Ah!" as he stood gloatingly above her. "That pleases me. If it was only Beeson, now! If it was only Beeson!"

He spurned her with his foot, and she fell forward, limp and apparently lifeless.

The sight filled the maniac with glee, and he danced for a moment about her in wild ecstasy.

"If it was only Beeson!" he continued to mutter. "But this will touch him! This will strike him! Revenge! Revenge! Ah!"

The exclamation was drawn out into something resembling a howl.

"Lawrence Beeson killed me, and now, to be revenged on him, I'll kill her. What a splendid thing that she come hyer. It was ordered. Yes, I'll kill her and be revenged on Beeson!"

He spurned her again with his foot, and once more executed that maniacal dance.

She evinced no sign of returning consciousness; and perhaps it was well she did not; for, with the return of her senses would have come the horror and agony of her situation, renewed tenfold.

Broncho Barton, seeing that she remained in an apparently lifeless condition, rushed in haste from the building.

When he came back he had the horse's picket-rope.

"First rate! First rate!" he exclaimed, dragging the rope after him as he passed through the doorway. "The very thing for the business! She can't break that, and the fire will eat her up before it bites through these strands. It's just the thing! Just the thing!"

This indicated a horrible purpose—a purpose born in his mind by a recollection of the recent fire.

Without more ado, he advanced to where Fawnie Lawrence was lying in her deathlike swoon, and bound her with the heavy rope.

Having accomplished this, and surveyed his work to his satisfaction, he tore a light pine board from the side of the building and crushed and whittled it into small pieces.

When he had done this, he arranged the pieces in a heap in one corner of the room. Then he whittled a lot of shavings and arranged them; and, applying a match to the whole, folded his arms and watched the flame as it leaped upward and grew in volume.

"Revenge! Revenge!" he cried, capering nimbly about the fire. "I will strike Lawrence Beeson a blow he will never forget. He loves this woman. Perhaps he wants to marry her! But he never shall! He never shall! The fire will burn her, and her ashes will become the bride of the wind."

Loud and piercing rose the laugh that concluded this; and this screeching laugh arose again and again when the leaping flames caught the light wood of the building and began to burn more briskly.

"She will burn!" he exclaimed, throwing his hands upward, in maniacal satisfaction. "And then, my revenge will be complete!"

The shack was built of dry pine, which, when it was once on fire, burned rapidly, and with steadily increasing energy.

Feeling that his work was accomplished, Broncho Barton stepped to the doorway and took a survey of the plain, looking away in the direction taken by Beeson and the ladies. They were out of sight, miles away. It was impossible for them to return in time to aid her, even should they behold the ascending smoke and suspect the cause of it.

This was so pleasing to the maniac that he chattered in great glee, as he ran toward the horse, which was quietly cropping the grass, unmindful of the dreadful scenes enacted in the house. Even the maniac's wild cries had not disturbed it.

Broncho Barton was nimble-fingered and thoroughly at home in the management of horses, and in an inconceivably short space of time he had the animal attached to the buggy, and was urging it at brisk speed across the prairie in the direction of the hills.

And behind him the smoke of the burning building was just beginning to make itself visible through the crevices in the walls.

Broncho Barton had not been gone five minutes—though he was out of sight behind a

rising knoll—when Fawnie Lawrence began to come by slow degrees to a return to consciousness.

She was first aware of a dreadful oppression and a numbing feeling, and then of the stifling odor of smoke with which the house was becoming filled.

Her terror before, great as it had been, was as nothing compared with what she now experienced. An unutterable horror shone in her eyes. Her breath came in gasps, and almost unconsciously she began to strain and tug at the rope which bound her.

She could not loosen its hold; and was compelled to lie there and see the insidious fire make its way like a stealthy demon toward her.

Then, realizing her utter helplessness and the fearful fate that awaited her, her screams rose frantically, one after the other, in a heart-piercing succession.

And still the fire crept nearer and nearer!

"Oh, my God! Am I to die thus?" she wailed, turning to the opposite wall to shut out the awful sight.

But the fascination of that eating, writhing, creeping monster was too great, and she looked again, even though it was like looking into the ghastly face of Death.

No brain could stand that strain! No one could lie there watching the advance of those flames, without going mad.

And a madness that was a blessing, even though it was driveling and pitiable, came to her; and in a little while a smile of peace overspread the face that had been so fear-distorted, and she began to prattle to the crawling fire as if it were a child with which she was playing.

And still the smoke gathered in denser volumes, and the flames grew hotter and hotter, and, swooping toward her, laughed and danced in a wild glee that seemed a horrible echo to Broncho Barton's.

CHAPTER XXIII.

A HEARTRENDING SEARCH.

THE dense volume of smoke ascending heavenward from the burning shack attracted the attention of Beeson and his companions, finally.

"What can that mean?" Beeson asked, anxiously, gazing at it.

He saw it was in the direction of Fawnie's shack, but did not at the time dream that the shack might be on fire. He thought, rather, that the prairie fire had spread in that direction. But when the smoke continued to rise from the one place, his fears were aroused.

The ladies were also excited and nervous; and it was agreed that all should drive back that way to assure themselves Fawnie was in no danger.

When they had driven about a mile, they ascended a mound; and from its summit beheld a sight that made them shiver.

There could be no question now that the building was burning. They had no glass, and were too far off to make out anything with certainty, shrouded as the view was by the smoke, but this truth was irresistibly driven home to them.

And then began a race for the fire—Beeson leading the way, in one of the buggies. His anxiety became so great as they advanced, and it was seen that the conflagration had spread to the prairie, that he took the horse out of the buggy, and, leaping on its back, drove it forward at frantic speed, letting the ladies come on at a slower pace.

It was a terrible sight he witnessed when he arrived at the scene of the fire. The building had been consumed, leaving nothing but a heap of smoking ruins.

All around was a blackened waste; for the fire had caught in the high grass, transforming the landscape into another scene of desolation, like that through which the party had ridden some hours before.

Beeson uttered a frantic cry and hurried up to the smoking heap—all that remained of the shack. The movement was involuntary, as he could not but know that, even if she had been destroyed by the fire, her remains were not likely to be seen.

In spite of his calloused nature, Lawrence Beeson was inexpressibly shocked. It was a sight to move the hardest heart to tears of pity. And, in his own selfish way, he had thought well of Fawnie, even though he did not love her after the strong manner of his protestations.

He could not believe that she had perished in the fire, and so began to search for some indications of her flight.

He had noticed at first that the horse and buggy were gone; and it seemed likely that she had made use of them in escaping.

But if she had done so, why had she not driven in the direction taken by her recent companions?

This was explainable only on the supposition that the fire which had caught in the grass had barred that way to her.

It required but little search to show that the horse and buggy had left there before the burning of the prairie. There was not the faintest sign of the trail; the hoof-prints and wheel-marks having been obliterated by the cinders which so thickly strewed the ground. If she had left after the fire, this would have been the

case. The trail of Beeson's horse was as plain as print.

This convinced him that she was alive and safe, and had fled in time.

Before he had finished his researches, the ladies arrived, in a state of distress and excitement.

The search that then ensued was as thorough as they could make it in the short time left to them. All it revealed was that no trace of her could be found; and then the gathering gloom of night shut down around them.

In the morning, they found that their chances of discovering anything were even less. During the night a high wind had so blown the black ashes that the trails of their buggies were blotted out; and there seemed little likelihood, therefore, that anything could be accomplished by a further hunt conducted along that line.

The work was continued, however, in a desultory way; but without any result. She did not return, as they kept hoping she might, and as they had every reason to believe she would, if she were yet alive; and late that afternoon they started, a mournful party, on their return to Hot Springs.

The dreadful news of what had occurred reached Teamster Tom in his office the next day, through the medium of the Deadwood papers. It felt like the shock of a thunderbolt.

He had been slowly piecing together the evidence he had collected against Beeson, and wondering if it would be safe to move boldly against him and cause his arrest when he returned to Shoshone. He was beginning to feel that he had secured enough damaging testimony to justify him in this.

But all such thoughts were scattered to the wind by this horrified account.

The report had been telegraphed from Hot Springs, where it had been gathered from the lips of Beeson and his companions. No doubt was expressed that Fawnie Lawrence had lost her life in the burning of the shack; and the horror of the ladies of the party, and Beeson's great grief, were graphically depicted.

Teamster Tom sat like one in a stupor, as his eyes slowly wandered down the column. He could scarcely believe that he read aright. He felt rather that he was possessed by some horrible nightmare.

When he could no longer doubt, he got up and paced the floor of the office in a very delirium of contending emotions. It seemed to him his brain was on fire, and that he was surely losing his mind.

His thoughts taking another turn, he sat down and began to ponder on what he had read. The startling suggestion had come to him that Beeson might have brought about the girl's death, because she had a knowledge of his crimes, and from a fear of exposure. He did not doubt that she must know something of Beeson's baseness; and he could not doubt that Beeson was none too good for such an act, should he think it would serve his ends.

This turned him again to the many black proofs of various crimes which he had so laboriously gathered against Beeson. Beeson was a scoundrel of the vilest stamp; a man to whom life was as nothing.

He got up again and recommenced his uneasy paces.

"I'm going to see into this thing!" he affirmed. "It may be that Fawnie isn't dead, and that the whole thing is a horrible mistake. If she is dead, I can never believe that Beeson is the innocent, heart-broken man that account makes him out to be. It is my duty, it seems to me, to make some kind of a quiet investigation."

His anguish was so great he could not remain idle; and, having decided on a plan of action, he began immediate preparations for its execution.

He called in Tom Marbury and read to the astonished man the dreadful account contained in the Deadwood daily, and then communicated to him his dark suspicions.

Marbury was as much shocked and distressed as Teamster Tom had been; and he readily fell in with Tom's idea concerning Beeson. He placed quite as low an estimate on Beeson's moral character as did his employer.

"You bet I'd go!" he declared, "and I'd sift this thing to the bottom. It looks mighty like there's a big pile of dirt hyer. That there Beeson's as black a skunk as ever walked! Talk about him bein' sorry! Why, he was never sorry for anything that ever happened, 'less it was some time when he got beat at a game of poker. Him sorry! Dog-gone me! he ain't got any more heart than a chunk of quartz!"

There was some balm in this coincidence of views; as much balm and heart's-ease as could probably be extracted from anything, under the circumstances.

That afternoon Teamster Tom set out for Deadwood; and from thence posted in all haste to Hot Springs.

He found Beeson and the ladies still there; and other suspicions, of a different nature, were aroused when he noticed the limp in Beeson's walk.

Beeson and his companions left that evening for Deadwood. Perhaps Beeson took this step because he did not wish to linger about where he could be seen by his old enemy. Teamster

Tom had not spoken to him, nor made any mention to any one of the reason of his visit. He was glad when he saw Beeson depart; and within a very few minutes thereafter, he was mounted on a fast horse, heading for the scene of the tragedy.

He reached the place which held the blackened heap of ashes and burnt timber—all that remained of the shack—after nightfall. Notwithstanding the darkness he made what search and examination he could, plowing and poking among the ruins in a heart-breaking and pitiable way.

Nothing was revealed; and the next morning, after a sleepless night of heart-ache and anguish, he scoured the surrounding country.

When he found nothing whatever, a faint feeling of hope returned to him; and this increased when he made another examination of the ruins by daylight.

To thus poke among the ashes, fearing every minute to come upon charred bones—the bones of one he had loved better than his own life—was a gruesome thing to do. But he persisted in it; and when no bones were found, after a most thorough hunt, his hopes began to mount much higher.

It seemed to him an impossible thing that there should be no tell-tale remnant, no mute witness to testify of her death in the flames. This absence of such evidence might have been expected had the house been a large one. But he saw that it had only been a small shack; and he was convinced that the heat of the fire had not been great enough to destroy everything.

Thus feeding this new-born confidence, he resolved to prosecute his search until there could no longer be any doubt that she had perished. And then! Then, he would wind about Lawrence Beeson the web he had so long been weaving, and make the arch scoundrel suffer, even as he had suffered.

When he again reached Hot Springs, he found new news awaiting him. The liveryman had recovered the horse and buggy which had been left with Fawnie, and which had so mysteriously disappeared. The horse and buggy had been sold by some stranger to a man in Buffalo Gap only the day before; and from him the liveryman had repossessed himself of them.

Teamster Tom saw the horse, and when he looked on it his eyes filled with unbidden tears. He reflected that it was perhaps the last living object seen by Fawnie Lawrence.

"Oh, if it could only speak!" was his inward exclamation; and then with an almost breaking heart he turned away.

Feeling that he had a clew, he hurried to Buffalo Gap and interviewed the man who had purchased the horse. It had been sold to him by a stranger; and that stranger was now in jail for the crime committed.

Teamster Tom felt that the trail was broadening; but when he went to the jail and was there shown a man he had never before seen, the blow was almost unbearable.

He questioned the fellow closely. As the man had already made a confession, he told Teamster Tom without any reluctance how and where he got the horse and buggy. He had found the horse wandering in the hills, with the buggy attached to it.

This was apparently inexplicable, and if true, only added to the mystery surrounding the case. Had Fawnie Lawrence escaped from the shack and then been thrown from the buggy?

In no other way could the thing be explained. "I'll find out the truth!" he declared, as he walked back again to his hotel. "I will devote my whole time to it. Ay! And every dollar I have!"

CHAPTER XXIV.

MATTERS MATRIMONIAL.

SMITH FAGGETT was no less astonished than Teamster Tom had been, when he read what was contained in the Deadwood dailies. He had no such doubts as Tom had had, however, accepting the statements of the reporters without question. It was a terrible thing! A very terrible thing! But then, Miss Lawrence was nothing to him.

He even felt a little thrill of secret joy. Some time before he had a communication from D. Webster Langdon, his old-time Deadwood friend and ally, in which Langdon had told of Beeson's visit and interview.

Langdon knew that Beeson believed Miss Lawrence to be the real heiress, and so informed Smith Faggett.

Because of this information, Smith Faggett had for some days been rather lax in his devotion to Laura Rudiger. He felt he could not afford to put his head into the matrimonial noose unless he was dead sure that that noose would be of pure gold.

But with Miss Lawrence dead, it occurred to him that there would be nothing to interfere with Laura Rudiger's claim to the fortune.

This may have been a very short-sighted view of the case, but it was the view taken by Smith Faggett. Hence, he resolved to increase the warmth of his attitude toward Miss Rudiger.

That no grass might be allowed to grow under his feet, he betook himself straightway to

Miss Rudiger's boudoir—the sail “boudoir” being, at that hour, the kitchen of the Beeson residence.

Laura Rudiger flushed when she saw him coming, for she was in no condition to receive a caller. But she hurried with all haste to her room, after instructing the housekeeper to detain him for a minute; and a little later presented herself before him in the parlor, very handsomely dressed, and with the sunniest of smiles.

She had not yet heard of the tragedy near Hot Springs; and he did not deem it wise to prematurely acquaint her with it. The Deadwood dailies had only been in town a few minutes; and he did not want it to be supposed that his change of manner toward her was caused by them.

“I’m glad to see you looking so charming,” was his observation, beaming fondly at her, and then drawing her to a seat at his side.

She was a handsome woman, and knew how to attire herself to set off her charms most becomingly.

She had been chafed by his recent apparent indifference, and this alteration in demeanor pleased her.

“You always was a flatterer!” she pouted, slapping at his detaining hand. “Why can’t you speak the truth, sometimes? You know I’m a horrid fright!”

This declaration was accompanied by a self-conscious look that gave it the lie.

“You were never so to me,” was his warm assertion, as he pressed her hand. “You always were the best-looking woman in this town, and there are other men who think so. Plenty of them!”

“You always was a base flatterer,” she repeated, very much pleased by this. “Now, you can’t tell me of one single man who ever said he thought I was good-looking.”

“Perhaps they were married men!” drawing her to him still closer.

“You knew what I meant, hateful!”

“And I’ll tell you what I think: That you’re so charming-looking this morning that I want to marry you right away.”

She gave a little gasp and struggled from him. This was so supremely delightful!

“Why, Mr. Faggett! How you talk!”

“Oh, I mean it! I mean every word of it! What do you say to us getting married right away?”

“I say that you oughtn’t to talk to me in that way,” still avoiding his clasp.

“Why not? You’ve already promised to marry me, some time. I don’t see any reason for putting it off forever.”

“Oh, I couldn’t think of it!” clasping her hands and looking shyly down. “I just couldn’t think of it, Mr. Faggett!”

He understood her mood pretty well. She wanted to be coaxed. He had been cool, and she wanted him to make up for it by an extra degree of warmth.

“Why couldn’t you think of it?” he urged. “I’m in dead earnest, Laura! If you’ll name the day, you’ll make me the happiest man alive!”

“Do you mean it?”

She was about to draw away again, but he caught her and pulled her down at his side.

“I mean it!” he declared, kissing her rapturously. “I mean every word of it!”

Laura Rudiger’s foolish heart was fluttering like a bird in a cage, a fact he could tell very readily, as he held her close.

“Will you not fix the day?” he coaxed. “Make it early, my pet! The earlier the better! What do you say to this night week?”

“Oh, I really couldn’t, Mr. Faggett! I really couldn’t think of it! That would be so shamefully soon! Only a week?”

She drew in her breath with a deep sigh.

“A week is as good as a month or a year, if one only thinks so.”

“But it’s such short notice, Mr. Faggett! Why, I couldn’t turn round in a week!”

She was nestling close against him, and looking up into his face, her lips parted and her eyes shining.

“Call me by my first name, sweet! I so much prefer you to call me Smith than Mr. Faggett. When we are married, you will want to call me Smith, and I prefer you should begin it now.”

She smiled acquiescently.

“Name the day!” he pleaded. “Put it to-night a week, and you’ll make me the happiest man on the footstool!”

“You’re really in earnest?”

“In earnest, my dear? I never was more in earnest in my life, I assure you! Say to-night a week!”

“Dear Smith, it shall be that way, if you wish it!” languishingly and putting her lips up to his. “It seems to me, though, it’s so horrid soon! Don’t it strike you that way, my love? What will Mr. Beeson say, and the housekeeper? and—and—”

“All your dear five hundred friends. Well, I don’t care what they say, nor what they think. I don’t know that it’s any of their business if we choose to get married.”

“It’s so dreadful soon!” she declared again.

“I never dreamed of you wanting me to marry

you in such a hurry as this. But, dear Smith, if you are really earnest about it!”

She was so languishing in all this, that Faggett almost revolted against it, but he remembered the fortune and replied in honeyed tones:

“Then, this night a week it shall be!”

He held her from him, and looked into her face.

“Only think, my pet! One week! One short week! But oh, how long will it seem to me!”

“I’m afraid I can’t get my dresses ready by that time,” blushing and laughing. “You don’t want to marry a fright, you know. You don’t want to stand up by a horrid fright that you would be ashamed of!”

“I shouldn’t be ashamed of you, no matter how you were dressed. Bother the clothing! You look well enough and sweet enough, just as you are!”

Such a delightful lover as Smith Faggett was that day. Laura’s heart glowed with supreme satisfaction. She even fancied that she loved him, and would be forever miserable should anything occur to shipwreck their plans. She beamed on Faggett, smilingly, and fervently returned his caresses. Faggett was such a handsome man! Such a gorgeous dresser! And his station in life was so much above hers! It was quite a catch, she assured herself. Quite a catch; and she was proud of it.

Cards for the wedding were issued the next day, and sent to all the “dear five hundred” of whom Faggett had spoken. They were gotten up in ultra fashionable style, and were very pleasing to Miss Rudiger.

The Shoshone papers became aware of this—in a very accidental way, of course!—and surprised the prospective bride and bridegroom by publishing complimentary and liberal notices.

These notices were models of fulsome flattery. To be sure, it was not possible that Smith Faggett could have had any knowledge of these before they appeared! Oh, no! He was altogether too ingenuous a person and too little versed in the ways of a wily world. And for the same reason it could not have been possible that he wrote the notices; and the whispers of certain mischievous persons to that effect were no doubt the vilest of slanders. Any one who knew Smith Faggett would have known that he could never praise himself!

Each paper contained at least a column filled with lavish comments on the many brilliant and excellent qualities of its progressive citizen, Mr. Smith Faggett; and of descriptions and gossips of the beautiful and accomplished young lady who was so soon to become his bride.

Miss Rudiger devoured these notices with inward delight, and in the seclusion of her own room mused over them and built air castles in her own selfish way; all unaware of the fact that her prospective husband cared nothing for her, but was angling for a fortune.

But was she much better than he? If he was angling for a fortune, she was angling for personal and social advancement.

CHAPTER XXV.

THE GALL IN THE HONEY.

THE Beeson residence was ablaze with lights.

It was the night of the wedding, which had been so prominently announced by the papers. A large number of people were already in the house, and it could be seen that others were coming. It promised to be a swell affair.

Beeson was there, still a little lame, but not sufficiently so to attract much attention. He had discarded his cane.

Beeson had hosts of friends in Shoshone, as has been already attested in this story, and it was these who were flocking to the house.

The arrangements had been well under way, when Beeson came home from his trip to Hot Springs. He had been at first greatly shocked that a wedding should be thought of so soon after the fiery tragedy that had so broken him. He said this with an air of great truthfulness a number of times to a number of people; and therefore it must have been so.

But inasmuch as it was represented to him that the date of the wedding had been fixed before any knowledge of this terrible thing had reached those most interested, the shocked Mr. Beeson withdrew his objections.

There were some things that made him anxious that Laura Rudiger should be married, the principal of which was a suspicion that she had begun to spy on his movements.

Beeson’s lacerated feelings were so restored by the time the hour of the wedding arrived that he was able to participate in its festivities in a very gallant way. He might not have done this, had it not been impressed on his mind as a duty. There was no man who loved duty more than Mr. Beeson. Hence, in the discharge of this amiable virtue, he stood at the door of his dwelling, on that evening, and made welcome all who came that way.

The arrangements were of the most gorgeous and sumptuous character, as becoming the gorgeousness of the bridegroom and the beauty of the bride. There was a floral bell in the parlor, suspended from the ceiling, beneath whose petaled canopy the bride and bridegroom were to take their places when the eventful moment

arrived in which they were to be made one flesh.

Not only was there a bell, but the room was literally strewn with flowers, arranged in a lavish and not inartistic way.

The minister was there, too, for Shoshone boasted its minister and its church; and this reverend gentleman, attired in his neat suit of black, with white neck-cloth, beamed and smiled, in a very ministerial way; and cast the radiance of his benignant countenance over the entire assemblage.

Had this minister—who was a good man, and against whose character no word of reproach had ever been uttered—really known the people he was called on to unite in solemn matrimony, he would have shrunk in horror from the act. But he was blissfully ignorant.

When the time came, he performed the wedding ceremony in his most impressive manner, closing it with a prayer that the choicest blessings of Heaven might rest on the lives and hearts of the two who had been thus united for weal or woe, and make them exemplars of all the domestic virtues.

To those who best knew Smith Faggett and Laura Rudiger, the prayer and the ceremony, sincere as was the minister’s manner, seemed all a hollow mockery.

Laura Rudiger was radiant in a dress of the richest and costliest material; and when the words had been pronounced which made her the wife of Smith Faggett, a feeling of triumph came into her heart, and her eyes shone with a hidden emotion. She felt that the deed was done, now, and could not be undone; and there could be no doubt that for her there awaited a higher place than any she had ever yet filled.

A ball and a feast followed the wedding.

These were over at last, however; and Mr. and Mrs. Smith Faggett were left alone to begin the life they had mutually declared would be so charming.

Laura had danced until her head and her heels ached, and now sunk exhausted into a chair.

“Dear Smith!” she exclaimed, beaming on him. “I can’t really realize it! I feel all the time as if I must be dreaming.”

“It isn’t a dream at all, sweet,” he assured her. “It is the truth! The blessed truth! You are my wife! At last! At last!”

This was said as if he had never believed she would consent to occupy that position.

They were not to remain at Beeson’s, Faggett having already selected a house in another part of the town, to which he expected to conduct her in the course of a few days.

Of this house and its furnishings, and the life to be spent there, they talked for a time; and then, Faggett, looking earnestly at her, lovingly observed:

“I never spoke to you of the little secret which I dropped to a day or two ago! It was real cute in you, sweet, to keep it from me. But I forgive you!”

She looked her astonishment.

“What little secret?”

“Fie! Fie!” shaking a forefinger fondly at her. “Why did you never tell me that your real name is Myrtle Bostwick?”

At this her astonishment grew into amazement.

“How did you find that out?” she gasped.

“I learned it,” was his unsatisfactory reply.

“How did you find that out, Smith Faggett?” she demanded. “Tell me!”

Smith had prepared for this by making a trip to Deadwood just two days before the wedding.

“Well, you know, when I went up to Deadwood day before yesterday, I ran across several old friends there. One of them happened to be from Pierre; and when I spoke to him of our expected wedding, he said he thought he knew the bride. He said if her name was Laura Rudiger, he was sure he did; and that when she first came to Pierre, she was known there as Myrtle Bostwick.”

A look of crafty slyness was on his face.

As for Laura, she had at first turned white, and was now flushing painfully.

“I went by that name,” she confessed, “but it was never really my own name.”

It was Faggett’s time to look astonished.

“Not your own name?” not able to conceal his surprise.

“Dear Smith, I never thought to tell you about it! But I got into some trouble before I came to Pierre, and that’s why I took the name of Myrtle Bostwick.”

He stared at her, angrily.

“What in the fiend’s name do you mean by that?”

“Why, Smith dear!” with extreme anxiety.

“Don’t Smith dear me!” wrathfully rising.

“Was your name ever Myrtle Bostwick, or was it not?”

“It never was!” she replied, growing as white as the flowers at her throat. “What difference does that make?”

“Who, then, was Myrtle Bostwick?” without answering her.

“Why are you so inquisitive on that point, Smith? What difference does it make what name I went by? It was me you married, not a name!”

He sat down and glowered at her.

"You haven't told me about Myrtle Bostwick!"

"I don't see what you want to know about her for; but if you're determined to know, I can tell you! Myrtle Bostwick was a friend of mine; and we had some precious hard times together, I can assure you! We just about sewed our fingers to the bone in trying to make a living; and then half starved. She took sick and I took care of her; and after awhile she died. I wasn't hankering after my own name just then, and so I commenced to wear hers; and that's all there is about it."

Faggett got up again with an oath.

"So I see I've made a fool of myself!"

"Why, what's the matter, Smith, dear?" her anxiety of the intensest character.

"I told you not to Smith dear me any more! I won't stand it! Do you hear? I won't stand it! I've made the biggest fool of myself that any man ever did!"

"Will you explain yourself, Smith Faggett?" she said, also rising angrily. "I guess you always was a precious fool! I don't know what you're driving at; but I can tell you, now, that you ain't going to talk that way to me!"

She had been hurt at first, then indignant, and now she was on fire with anger.

"I'll talk as I please!" was his snappish retort.

"Not to me, you won't! You're a nice man, you are, to start a quarrel this quick! You'll make a loving husband, you will! I guess if there's any precious fool in this house, it's me!"

"You deceived me!" Faggett asserted. "I thought you was Myrtle Bostwick, and that you had some money coming to you."

He had thrown off the mask now, and was revealing his ugly nature in all its hideousness.

"Oh, that's what you married me for, was it?" her anger increasing. "You thought I had money coming to me, eh? Well, I was a precious fool to believe all your lies! I ain't got any money, Smith Faggett, and I don't never expect to have; and if you married me for that, I can tell you you're left!"

There was vindictive triumph in her voice.

"You fooled me!" Faggett cried, "and I don't propose to live with you a minute!"

He got up as if he meant to leave the house.

"Bah! You fooled yourself! Yes, and you tried to fool me by telling me that you loved me and cared something for me. I do believe, Smith Faggett, you're the blackest scoundrel I ever saw! I am glad I'm not Myrtle Bostwick; for if I was, you'd go on with your lies like you've been doing! Now, I know you for what you are. And I scorn you, Smith Faggett! I hate you!"

She was in a whirlwind of wrath.

Faggett was no less angry, feeling for the time being that he was a greatly-deceived and abused man.

"You had no right to play such a trick! You had no right to ever call yourself Myrtle Bostwick, if that wasn't your name. You must have done it to deceive somebody. I don't doubt you knew there was a fortune coming to her, and thought to catch a husband by it."

"Yes, that's what I thought!" sneeringly. "And I caught him! A dear, darling, lovey, dovey of a husband! Oh, you precious scamp, you!"

"Will you stop that?" he demanded, galled to the quick.

"A wootsy-tootsy of a husband! You're a lovely guy, Smith Faggett; and I took you in and deceived you and done you up! Yes, that's what I done. Ain't you proud of yourself? Fooled by a silly woman! Trapped by a kitchen mechanic!"

"Will you shut up?" Faggett threatened.

"If you don't, you'd better!"

She only laughed scornfully.

"My dear Smith! My darling Smith! What are you going to do with all that money when you get it? You've made a splendid bargain! Don't you feel proud of yourself?"

It was too much for the incensed gambler. Her gibing tongue was like a stabbing sword. He could not endure it. It stung and irritated him.

"I guess I'm as proud of my bargain as you are!" he declared, and then stalked to the door.

She flung another taunt at him, resolved to have the last word; and for an instant he seemed determined to turn back and give her a personal chastisement.

But he thought better of it; and, slamming the door after him, stepped moodily into the dark street.

CHAPTER XXVI.

A WORTHY PAIR.

WHEN Faggett left the house, he was determined never to return to it. He meant to abandon the woman on this their wedding night, and leave her to go on in the old life, explaining things as best she could, and subject to the galling whispers of the gossips. He felt that in this way only could he be properly revenged on her.

He was so angry, however, that no clear

thought came to him. Only a burning sense of indignation and defeat.

In this cheerless temper, he walked up and down the deserted streets in the blackness of the night, grateful that no watchful eyes were observing him.

As the minutes passed, however, his old scheming nature began to return, and he cast about for ways to repair the injury. He had thought to leave Shoshone in the morning by the first stage. There appeared to be no further occasion for his remaining there, now that his plan had failed.

But as reflection took the place of wrath, he recalled the death of Fawnie Lawrence, and the thoughts which it had invoked. There was yet a chance to gain the fortune belonging to Myrtle Bostwick, if he could only work his cards right.

It was plain that Laura knew more about Myrtle Bostwick than did any one else. Her knowledge on the subject would be invaluable. He could do nothing without her aid. And he began to see that he had been very foolish indeed in giving way to his temper and casting her off.

According to Laura's story Myrtle Bostwick was dead; and Laura ought to know, for she had been with Myrtle when the latter died. It was evident, then, that Fawnie Lawrence could not be Myrtle Bostwick; and, therefore, Lawrence Beeson could not set up a claim to the fortune as her heir.

The proofs showing that Laura was the real Myrtle Bostwick had been strong enough to fool so shrewd a man as Webster Langdon. Then, they were certainly strong enough to enable the deception to be continued. The public knew nothing of the facts. Hence, there seemed nothing to prevent him from carrying out his first scheme, and claiming the fortune in the name of his wife—except the consent of that amiable woman herself!

It nettled him to think of returning and suing for forgiveness; and he could not fully make up his mind to do so. Finally, when the gray dawn found him wandering the streets, he knew he should have to go somewhere to escape attention, and so took his way to the house.

He felt nervous and humiliated, and dreaded the coming meeting with Laura. Until that night he had never dreamed she had such a fiery temper.

The door by which he had emerged was still unlocked, and by it he let himself into the house. All was quiet, and he slipped into the parlor and sat for a long time thinking of his new scheme, and of how to approach her concerning it.

He did not venture to go in search of her until broad day. Then when he heard a stir in the kitchen, he tip-toed up to their room, and tapped softly on the door:

"If that's you, Mary, come in!"

The tones were Laura's, but they were harsh and unnatural; and he saw she had mistaken his rap for that of the housekeeper.

It was as good a way to get over the first difficulty as any, and so he opened the door and stepped into the room.

She was seated in a chair, with a valise and trunk beside her, appearances indicating she had prepared for a journey.

It required scarcely a glance to convince him she had not retired at all, but had remained up and awake throughout all the long and dark hours since his departure.

He saw, too, that she had been weeping; but a hot light flamed into her eyes now.

"I thought you had gone!" she sneered. "You might as well go! I'm going myself, as soon as the stage starts for Deadwood. I've been fearing you might be my company."

"I've come back," he said, simply, sinking into a chair, and looking fixedly at her, but without any apparent emotion. "I thought it silly for us to quarrel, when we may be able to help each other."

"You can go!" she exclaimed, pointing to the door. "I don't ever want to see you again!"

"Don't make any bigger fool of yourself than you have to, Laura!" he retorted. "For the present I'm not going. I came to talk over a little business. I guess there's no use for any pretended love and honey between us, for I think we now understand each other pretty well. I married you because I thought you would bring me a fortune, and you married me because—"

"I was lacking in sense!"

"Because you didn't want to be any longer a servant girl, and thought I could give you a home," he continued. "You see I'm not mealy-mouthed about these things. What's the use? You don't really care anything for me!"

"I did, once!" with peppery emphasis. "But now—now I hate you!"

"Thank you for that," trying to force a laugh. "Married people who hate each other, generally make the most outward show of affection. To the world, we ought to seem the most loving pair on record. And that brings me to my business proposition; for I came back strictly on business."

Such utter scorn as shone in her face.

"You remember what I said to you about Myrtle Bostwick?"

She did not reply, but tapped the floor with unusual emphasis.

"Myrtle Bostwick was to come into a fortune, and you say she is dead. I thought you were Myrtle Bostwick. I'll be frank with you, and say I had the strongest reasons in the world for thinking so. In fact, I employed a Deadwood detective to look into the matter; and the proofs pointed so strongly to you that we never for a moment doubted them."

"When was that?"

"Before I ever saw you; while I was still in Deadwood. I'm going to tell you the truth, now, if I never told it before, and never tell it afterward."

"And that's why you made love to me!"

"Exactly! I see you're a good guesser."

"Well, what does all this amount to?" turning from him in disgust.

"Just this!" and he bent eagerly forward. "If the proofs were strong enough to fool that Deadwood detective, who is one of the keenest men in the hills, they are strong enough to fool the world. What's to prevent us, now, from patching up a truce and going in for that fortune? I want money, and you want money; and it will be the biggest thing in the world for both of us. We can keep our little row to ourselves and go right along as if nothing had occurred; and then, when we've collared the swag, we needn't live together any longer, if we don't want to. We can separate quietly, without any fuss—after dividing the money—and you can go your way and I will go mine. What do you say to the proposition?"

His cool assurance almost took away her breath.

"I say you're the biggest scoundrel that ever walked!"

"Granted, for the sake of the argument!" and smiled serenely.

That she did not immediately order him out of the room he construed as a point in his favor; and again returned to the charge.

"You can't afford to refuse," he argued. "There's at least twenty thousand dollars in the scheme, and you'll get ten thousand of it. You couldn't make that much in a hundred years, at kitchen work."

The newly made Mrs. Faggett was quite as unscrupulous as her villain of a husband. She had no money whatever, and had been wondering what she should do on her arrival in Deadwood. So his unworthy proposal held some charm for her.

"You're such a grand scamp and liar, Smith Faggett, that I'd be afraid to believe anything you'd say, if you'd take an oath to it on top of a stack of Bibles!"

"Likely enough I'm a scamp, Laura; but I'm no fool. In that fact is your guarantee. All the advantage will be on your side. The money will come to you and not to me, though of course I expect to have some hand in manipulating it. But you'll hold the cinch!"

She looked at him doubtfully.

"I don't want you to talk to me!" she declared, something of her late anger returning. "I can't and won't believe you! This is just some new plan of yours to get the better of me."

Faggett was free with his protestations.

"Leave me alone for awhile," she said. "Come back just before breakfast, and maybe I'll have an answer for you."

"You'll abandon your idea, then, of going on the stage this morning?"

"No, I don't think I will. I haven't said so!"

He knew she would, though; and in much better spirits returned to the street and made his way down-town.

He remained away from the house until he felt he could not remain away longer.

The compliments and well-wishes of his friends and acquaintances he accepted smilingly, never for a moment revealing the slightest hint of the estrangement that had taken place.

Breakfast was awaiting him on his return; and with the utmost politeness and apparent consideration, he accompanied Laura to the breakfast room.

On their way to this room not a word was said concerning his proposition. He was sure, however, from her manner that she was beginning to think favorably of it.

Beeson and the housekeeper were the only other persons at breakfast.

When Mr. and Mrs. Smith Faggett regained their room, he immediately broached the subject that was uppermost in the minds of both.

"Have you come to any conclusion?" he asked.

She seemed to have grown coldly indifferent to his presence, and now looked at him very much as she might have looked at an utter stranger.

"Tell me all about it," was her request. "All about your plans and your proofs, and where this fortune is, and how it is to be got hold of."

Her change of demeanor was pleasing, and he hastened to comply.

"Yes, I'll help you," she said. "We'll be

man and wife before the world, until we get hold of this money. Then we'll divide it and separate."

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE NEW CLAIMANT.

AFTER the fashion of new and devoted husbands, Smith Faggett remained at home with his wife throughout most of the day. The time, however, was not given up to love talk and caresses. He spent the day instead in preparing a lot of "news items" for the Shoshone and Deadwood papers. These items were intended to astonish the world by revealing the fact that the popular Mrs. Faggett of Shoshone had been discovered to be the long-lost heiress, Myrtle Bostwick, and that a great fortune awaited her, to obtain possession of which steps had already been taken.

In the preparation of these, Laura assisted him with her counsel and suggestions; and when the accounts had been duly prepared for publication, they read them over together with a great deal of satisfaction.

Faggett waited two days before venturing to offer these to the papers. Then he personally visited the editors of the Shoshone papers, and, with a like end in view, interviewed the representatives of the Deadwood dailies. Whether any money was passed at the time, deponent saith not. Judging from Smith Faggett's honesty of character, and the well-known purity of all press representatives, it may be safe to assume that no bribery took place.

The accounts written by Faggett appeared in due course in the papers of the two towns, and were copied somewhat largely in the press of the Black Hills region. They made of Faggett a marked man—as much a marked man as the finder of a new gold mine. This stumbling by chance onto a fortune was even better than finding a gold mine, for too frequently a gold mine is an expensive thing to work. While, on the contrary, if these reports were to be believed, all Faggett and his amiable lady had to do was to shake this tree of fortune and open their mouths for the plums to drop in.

Mrs. Faggett eagerly devoured these newspaper statements, reading them again and again with an avidity that did not seem to be destroyed by the knowledge she possessed of their composition. Seeing them in print was like hearing the story from other lips, and the good things there said of her made her weak soul swell with pride.

But there came a result from these publications entirely unlooked for; and yet, if Smith Faggett had been as shrewd as on the surface he seemed to be, he might have expected it.

This was the counter-claim almost immediately set up by Lawrence Beeson.

No sooner had Beeson read these accounts of the purported discovery—and no one was more astounded than he at seeing them in the papers!—than he began to search for Faggett, with the intention of demanding what was meant by the claim.

He found Faggett at the house, and, with a manner that was rather icy, requested a few words with him in the parlor.

Faggett saw the wrath in Beeson's eye, but he braced himself for the ordeal of the meeting.

"You've rather got ahead of yourself, Faggett, haven't you?" Beeson questioned, when they were where they were not likely to be overheard. "What do you mean by publishing such stuff as that?"

He drew out the paper and pointed to the offending paragraphs.

"It's true!" said Faggett, sturdily. "There's no harm in telling the truth, I reckon!"

"You wrote that yourself, Faggett; and you know it ain't true."

Faggett whitened a little, but he folded his arms and very coolly surveyed his antagonist.

"Why ain't it true?"

"Because Miss Lawrence was the real heiress! and now that she's dead, if there's any fortune—which I sometimes doubt—it belongs to me. I'm her next of kin, and therefore her rightful heir."

Faggett sneered disdainfully.

"And that's all you know about it, is it? Well, I happen to know a good deal more. I know that my wife can prove that her real name, before she married, was Myrtle Bostwick; and she can give good reasons for changing her name. What have you got to say to that? The property is Myrtle Bostwick's, ain't it?"

"I say that you can't prove anything of the kind!"

"All right! We'll see! The longest pole knocks the persimmon."

"I know," Beeson went on, "that you had this man Langdon of Deadwood to scrape together a lot of pretended proofs—"

"Which you went up there and tried to worm out of him!"

At this a wordy war ensued, which moment by moment grew hotter, until it seemed the two would come to blows.

"I think you know more than you'd care to tell about how Miss Lawrence came to her death," Faggett asserted.

"What do you mean by that?" bridling angrily.

"I don't know as I mean anything."

"Then, keep your tongue between your teeth and don't go to insinuating. I'm as innocent as you are of that, and you know it; and if you go to whispering anything of that kind around, I'll pound your head to a jelly!"

Faggett quailed, for Beeson had drawn himself up in a threatening manner, and there was a dangerous light in his eyes.

"I don't know as I meant anything by that, Beeson; and if I did, I'll take it back. The idea struck me, though, as being reasonable; especially so, as you're so quick to set yourself up as her heir."

"Will you stop that, Faggett? or shall I jump on you?"

"I don't know as we've any call to quarrel!" Faggett avowed, showing his teeth evilly in an attempted smile. "Neither of us can accomplish anything by that. I say that property belongs to my wife, and you say it belongs to you. That's a wall that we can't get around; but there's no sense in us snarling at each other over the top of it like a couple of dogs."

"Of course, you'll do your level best to get this money, and of course, you can count on finding me crowding you in the race. I ain't afraid that you'll beat me, for there's not a doubt in the world that my wife is the genuine Myrtle Bostwick."

"Oh, stow that!" Beeson growled, turning on his heel. "You'll be claiming next that she's an angel! I'd believe one as quick as the other!"

He had accomplished nothing, and left the house in a more savage state than that in which he entered it.

"Oh, you're a precious cute one!" Faggett declared, shaking his fist after him, "but when you get ahead of me, you'll have to rise early."

While this quarrel was taking place at Beeson's, Jed Marbury was whispering sweet nothings into the willing ear of Mrs. Partridge, at the restaurant.

"I don't 'low we could have as spankin' a weddin' as that one was," Jed slyly asseverated, giving the plump widow a sidelong glance. "I didn't have no invite myself, but I hear it was a stunnin' affair."

He was speaking, of course, of the recent matrimonial scene enacted at Beeson's; and was endeavoring to make of the reference a lever with which to move the indifferent heart of his charmer.

"I ain't never said, Jed Marbury, that we was going to have a wedding!"

"Well, you jist as good. I count it as if we was hitched, now."

"I've heard tell of people countin' things when they oughtn't to."

"Eggs, eh? and spilt ones? Well, these hyer's first rate; and they're gittin' along so uncommon handsome that I can 'most hear the chickens 'peep!' When air you goin' to git sensible an' name the day?"

What her reply might have been was forever lost to these chronicles by a heavy tread at the door; and, turning around, they saw Teamster Tom enter.

He had been gone for some time, and they were not aware of his return to town.

He was haggard and sad-faced, and seemed worn out; which was indeed his condition. He had scarcely rested day or night in his searches for some clew to the real fate of the missing girl. He had spent time and money, as he had declared he would, and only failure and disappointment had resulted.

These friends hurried to meet him and overwhelmed him with a multitude of questions.

"I've given up!" he said. "I have lost all hope!"

He would not have said this to any other persons; and the same feeling of security and sympathy which prompted the expression allowed the tears to course unchecked down his cheeks.

That night Smith Faggett started for the East to look after the fortune which he meant to claim for his bride.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

AT THE BURNING SHACK.

HIGHER and higher rose the flames in the doomed shack, where Fawnie Lawrence sat bound and helpless, with the unconscious joy of insanity sparkling in her eyes and gushing from her lips. Nearer and nearer they approached, mingling their crackle and roar with her happy laughter. At last they caught at her very garments, and she vainly essayed to clap her pinioned hands, in an ecstasy of delight.

Suddenly the door was thrown violently open and a man rushed wildly into the room.

"My God!" he exclaimed, springing to Fawnie's side.

To tear away a portion of her burning skirts, and sever with his knife the cords that bound her, was but the work of a moment.

"Don't take me away from them. They love me. See how they sparkle and dance about me!" cried the girl, striving to free her hand from his when he attempted to lead her from the room.

"Oh, the poor soul! Her wits is clean gone!" he said, pityingly, as he snatched her up in his arms and hurried out into the open air.

There was need for haste. The fire had caught in the grass surrounding the house, and was burning furiously. It would not be long until the whole prairie would be a mass of flames.

There was a white-topped wagon drawn up only a few paces from the shack, just beyond range of the heat. A slatternly-looking woman, her face shielded by a big sun-bonnet, was sitting in the wagon with the reins in her hand. The horses were made restive by the fire, and at the moment when the man came out of the house with his burden, she was scolding impatiently at the horses and jerking at the lines.

There were also two children in the wagon, a boy and a girl; and in their faces there was a look of childish excitement.

The woman gave an exclamatory cry, as she beheld the white face of the girl, and observed her frantic struggles.

She could not understand this, and questioned the man, sharply.

"I reckon she's out of her head," he panted. "She was tied up in there, and the fire jist a-reachin' fer her."

The woman's hard features softened.

"The poor dear! Put her right in hyer by me, John!"

She slipped back from the seat to make way for him; and when Fawnie had been deposited in the wagon, the woman crouched beside her and began to ask anxiously about her injuries.

Fortunately Fawnie had become quiet, and was now as docile as a child. Even though the woman saw that Fawnie's mind was not right, she did not seem afraid of her; and talked to her as she might have talked to one of her own children.

"Tell me your name, dear," she said, when she had made the girl as comfortable as she could.

"My name, my name," echoed Fawnie in a dreamy way. "I had a name once, but it's gone, now. Did the fire yonder take it from me?"

She turned her gaze toward the blazing house as she spoke, and sat as if fascinated.

"We've got to git out o' hyer!" John Kennup exclaimed—for that was the man's name—shaking the lines over the team and uttering a series of loud clucks.

The horses did not move quickly enough, and he applied a whip.

The flames were already leaping wildly in the high grass, and it required no gift of prophecy to foretell what must soon occur. In a few minutes a furious prairie fire would be raging, endangering the lives of all within the wagon.

Under the goading whip the horses sprung forward at a rapid gallop, Kennup heading them straight away from the building.

He saw, on looking back a minute later, that he had not moved a moment too soon. The fire was already gathering in intensity, and racing toward them.

He stood up that he might apply the whip the more effectually, and with blows and words drove the horses on.

Kennup and his family were land-seekers, on their way to a claim which Kennup had previously selected near the base of the hills. They had made the long trip over the plains in their wagon, consuming many weeks in the journey; and it was only by the merest chance that they approached the shack in time to be of service to Fawnie Lawrence. The sight of the flames and smoke had caused them to drive near, through curiosity, for it seemed an odd thing that a shack should be thus burning without any one being seen about it, and without visible evidences of how the fire had started.

And when they had driven near, they might have passed on without a closer inspection, but for the exclamations which reached them.

The Kennups saw that here was something mysterious; and thus Fawnie's rescue was brought about.

Although the horses were only ordinary farm animals, Kennup forced them into a tremendous pace; and after the bounding wagon raced the fire, driven by the currents of air which its own heat created.

All the while Kennup was looking anxiously ahead for some point that promised a safe refuge. The mad race continued, however, for more than two miles before such a place was discovered.

It was a rocky draw or gully, in the dip between two slight elevations, and seemed to offer the best security to be obtained.

Into this gully Kennup drove his laboring team.

The flinty character of the ground here allowed but little grass to grow, but the elevations were well covered with it.

Kennup leaped out as soon as the horses stopped; and giving the lines to his wife, drew some matches from his pockets and fired the grass on the slope.

He knew from experience that it would require time for the fire to gather heat and volume; and that, located as they were, a circle could be burned around them which would check the other fire, and thus save them from injury.

Fawnie Lawrence crept forward to Mrs. Kennup's side and watched Kennup's movements with quite as much interest as that evinced by the children. She seemed to have become a child herself.

Mrs. Kennup spoke to her in reassuring tones, although there seemed no occasion for her doing so. Fawnie was not at all frightened; only eagerly interested, and somewhat excited.

The fire which had pursued them from the burning shack united with that started by Kennup, and raced and roared in a way that was frightful to see. The surrounding eminences and the level country stretching before, became flame-crowned and glorious in its appearance to the watchers in this secure retreat.

It raged for hours, and had not entirely subsided at the approach of night.

By many questions Mr. and Mrs. Kennup endeavored to extract from Fawnie some information relating to herself, and some knowledge of why she had been left bound in the burning shack. But on all these points her mind was a blank.

A high wind arose in the night, blowing the ashes in blinding clouds; and this continued in the morning, filling the upper air with a dismal pall.

In spite of this, however, Kennup rode back to the shack to see if he could discover anything bearing on the puzzling subject.

Beeson's party had departed on one of their searching tours, but the tracks made by their horses and buggies had been blown out; and Kennup returned to his wagon no wiser than before.

He had seen many young women living lonely lives in prairie shacks; and his natural conclusion was that Fawnie was one of these; and that, so far as friends or relatives were concerned, they might be far away, or she might have none. The puzzling thing was the bound condition in which he found her. He was compelled to confess there was no accounting for that.

As he and his family were anxious to go on, and it seemed that nothing could be gained by remaining where they were, they set out, after breakfast, on their way to their claim; still forced to travel through the disagreeable black dust-cloud.

Their claim was reached late that evening. In his previous visit to it, Kennup had erected a rude house of poles and logs cut from the hills, with a lean-to of sod.

The house had not been disturbed during his long absence, and the sight of its rough walls gave them renewed hope and encouragement.

Their life there promised to be a lonely one; but the fact that the land and the house was theirs made them strong and resolute. They had been poor renters in the East; and it was much to feel that whatever they might raise would be all theirs, and that every improvement and every tree set out added to the value of their land. It is this home-loving impulse that animates the breast of every true pioneer on the borders of civilization.

CHAPTER XXIX.

A WILD JOURNEY.

In this settler's cabin Fawnie Lawrence returned to her childhood and seemed to pass some of the happiest days of her life.

Kennup made such inquiries as he could of the few passing cattlemen and settlers who came his way, but none of them could afford him any information. And so the days slipped into weeks.

The slopes of the hills were covered with wild flowers, and many hours did Fawnie spend with the children wandering there, always under the watchful eye of Mrs. Kennup. Sometimes in these rambles a dim perception of the past, which was more like a waking dream than anything else, came to Fawnie; but it was always so dim she could not grasp it. She was like one seeking after truth—the truth of life—and always finding it elusive and the vague shadow of a hidden something.

The Kennups became much attached to her in those days, an attachment that was intensified by their pity and her ever genial cheerfulness. They strove to make her life pleasant, feeling their resources woefully inadequate, but anxious and willing to do all they could. And so they continued their inquiries, not anxious to have her leave them, but anxious to assist her all they could and to bring a knowledge of her condition to her friends.

But this passive, dreamy life was not to continue. There came a sudden and troubled break to it—a half awakening. Until the moment this occurred, Teamster Tom was to her as if he had never been.

She was playing on the hillside with the children, when a horseman rode by. He was a ranchman from up the country; and galloped straight along, with only a glance at the cabin and its people. But there was something in his appearance to remind her of Teamster Tom.

She sprang up, with eyes dilated, lips apart, and heart wildly palpitating, and stared at him in a distracted way.

Her manner frightened the children, though she was unaware of it.

The horseman galloped onward; and she ran after him, shouting and waving to him to stop. He neither saw nor heard her, and shortly disappeared over a knoll.

She ran on, however; and having gained the top of the knoll, and beholding him far below her in the valley, with the distance between them rapidly increasing, she gave way to a passionate outburst of grief and threw herself in a very abandon on the ground.

She came out of this frenzied state after a time, but her character seemed to have been changed by it. In place of the artless, simple look there was an air of craft and secrecy.

She returned to the children, but she did not re-engage with them in their play. Instead, she sat thinking, thinking, thinking! until her brain seemed on fire.

Throughout the remainder of the day she was strangely silent, speaking only when spoken to, and seldom giving more than monosyllabic replies. The Kennups were astonished at this change in her demeanor. But her mental aberration was sufficient to account for it; and so they avoided any mention of it, thinking she would soon regain her former cheerfulness.

The secretive, crafty look increased with the approach of night. She retired, with the family, at the accustomed hour, but she did not fall asleep. She remained very quiet, still thinking, thinking, thinking! those confused and jumbled thoughts that had possessed her on the hillside. She had a tolerably clear idea of what she wanted to do. She believed the horseman to have been Teamster Tom; though just who Teamster Tom was, or where she had previously seen him, or what he had ever been to her, was not so clear. She was irresistibly drawn toward him, and felt impelled to follow him.

She had carefully noted the direction the horseman was pursuing when he disappeared. It did not occur to her that he might change his course; and so she was sure that if she continued on, and on, and on, she must finally come up with him, even though he had so great a start.

This was what she resolved to do, and was what she had been thinking of all these hours. She was cunning enough to realize that the Kennups would not consent to her plan, and so she had kept it from them; and now she meant to steal out in the night and commence the journey.

She waited a long time in perfect silence, listening to the deep breathing of the slumbers about her; and then, when she felt sure they were soundly sleeping, she crept softly out of bed and dressed herself. She knew where to put her hand on her belongings. There was not much, but folded up in them by the careful hand of Mrs. Kennup, was the purse containing the money which had been found in the pocket of her torn dress. There were two twenty-dollar bills and some of smaller denomination. There was upward of fifty dollars in all; and Fawnie had taken it with her to her claim for the purpose of hiring some plowing done, and other work which was deemed necessary.

When she had secured these articles she tiptoed to the cupboard, and took therefrom a small quantity of food; and, having wrapped all up in an old apron, she slipped stealthily out of the house.

All her movements had been of the quietest character; so quiet, indeed, that the slumbers of the Kennups were not in the least disturbed.

Once out of the house, she started off at a brisk walk, pursuing the direction taken by the horseman.

She glanced back occasionally to see if she was being followed. Finally, when sure her flight was still unknown, she walked straight on.

Morning found her surrounded by rugged hills, and far from the humble cabin of the friends who had so kindly sheltered her. A feeling of despondency took hold of her, when the darkness faded away and the horseman was nowhere to be seen. She was tired, hungry and dust-covered, and as there was a spring of water near, she ate a little of the food she had brought, and then endeavored to obtain some rest.

She was much troubled, but she fell asleep after awhile. It was a sleep of deep exhaustion, from which she did not awake until aroused by the hot rays of the afternoon sun beaming in her face.

She leaped up with a start and stared around, apparently forgetful of why she was there. But the crafty look came back in a moment.

She was hungry again, and once more ate sparingly of the food, making up for this abstemiousness by liberal draughts from the spring.

Then she set her face resolutely in the direction she wished to go, and again tramped on.

Her discouragement had apparently left her, and at the top of every ascent she looked anxiously for the horseman whom she was so vainly pursuing. That the way was rough and broken, without any sign of a trail, and that no horseman would be likely to choose such a route, was a thought that did not come to her. She had last seen him going in that direction, and it did not occur to her to doubt that he was continuing in that course.

She traversed a number of miles that afternoon, for she walked on as long as there was sufficient light for her to see her way, and then sunk down again, exhausted.

The quest was renewed in the morning, and continued until near noon. Then, descending from an eminence, she saw before her a bustling town.

She had a dim perception that she had beheld the place before, though there was no clear recognition of this.

The town was Buffalo Gap.

The streets were scenes of bustling confusion, as she entered them, and as she walked straight forward without asking any questions, no heed was paid to her. Those who observed her thought, likely, she was some countrywoman. She was dust-begrimed and foot-sore, and far from tidy in appearance. But many an humble emigrant's wife was seen there looking as woe-begone.

Buffalo Gap was in the full tide of prosperity. The streets were crowded and clamorous. All sorts and conditions of people were represented, every one intent on his own affairs, and paying no heed to his neighbor. The hammer and saw of the carpenter were heard on all sides, and to unaccustomed ears the roar of business was appalling.

The Elkhorn Valley Railway had but recently been completed to that point, which was still the terminus; and this fact was sufficient to account for all the hurry and uproar. It made Buffalo Gap the supply point for the entire Black Hills region.

Fawnie Lawrence, however, was deaf and blind to all these sights and sounds. Up one busy street and down another she wandered, keenly scanning the dress and face of every horseman. But the one for whom she was searching was not to be found.

Her wanderings finally brought her to the railway station.

An engine and train was standing there, and passengers were swarming about the platform. Something seemed to whisper to her that the one for whom she was seeking had departed from the place by the railway line; and after some moments of hesitation, she entered one of the coaches and took a seat.

There was a great clanging of the engine's bell, in a little while, together with some premonitory whistles; and the train glided away from the station, and out into the open country of the lower plains.

When the conductor made his appearance, calling "tickets," he eyed her closely. As she did not extend a ticket, he inquired where she was going.

"Chicago!" she said, not knowing why.

The name of the great city flashed into her mind unbidden, and so she gave it as her point of destination.

At the same time, she handed up her purse and told him to take from it whatever was necessary.

He stared hard at her; but as there were no indications of insanity in her voice or manner, he crowded down his suspicions, if he had any. At any rate, he did not hesitate to take the amount of money which was his due; and then returned her purse, with the change in it.

"Chicago!" she crooned, as if the name was suggestive. "Yes, he must have gone to Chicago; and I'll go there, too!"

CHAPTER XXX.

BRONCHO BARTON'S STATEMENT.

As a distraction, on his return to Shoshone, Teamster Tom buried himself in the work of the mine and of the great boom. In no other way could he gain relief from the terrible memories that were ever ready to pounce down on him with crushing force.

There was no lack of work to do. He could slave day and night, never giving himself a moment's rest, and then not accomplish the half of what he saw might be done, and felt ought to be done. The curse of Eden, in times like these, is the choicest boon ever granted to mankind.

He never forgot the one aim of his life, which was to bring Lawrence Beeson to well-merited justice.

He might have moved against Beeson within a very few days after his return, but for a letter which he received from a man in Deadwood, and which started him on a new tack.

This Deadwood man was a detective, whom Teamster Tom had employed to assist him in his search for tidings of Fawnie Lawrence. The detective was loth to admit their defeat; and so had continued to hammer at the subject, even after Laidlaw had given up the quest.

Before the receipt of this letter, Teamster Tom had had dark suspicions that Beeson might know more about the death of Miss Lawrence than he would care to admit. But as they were only suspicions, and he had no way to verify them, he had kept them locked in his breast.

This letter caused him to bring out and review them anew.

The detective had learned something of the Myrtle Bostwick mystery; and stated in this

communication to Teamster Tome that Faggett had gone East in the interests of his new wife; and that Beeson had sent a detective on Faggett's track.

Teamster Tom knew of Faggett's claim to the Myrtle Bostwick thousands, for he had sufficiently exploited it in the papers to acquaint the whole world with his assertions.

But Teamster Tom had not known that Lawrence Beeson was also claiming the same property by reason of his heirship to Fawnie Lawrence.

This put a new face on matters; and, aided by the suggestions of the detective, he thought he could see through Beeson's scheme, and comprehend it clearly.

According to the ideas which he now worked out, it was plain that Beeson, failing to get Miss Lawrence's consent to a marriage, had accomplished her death for the purpose of coming in as her heir, and thus securing the fortune.

It was an idea to thoroughly stir him. He went over carefully every scrap of evidence he had been able to collect on the subject. There were many things to resist this theory, some of them apparently insurmountable. He explained away as many as he could, and believed that time would give the key to the others; and so clung tenaciously to his belief in Beeson's guilt.

The murderous estimate which he placed on Beeson's character doubtless had much to do with his convictions. He was sure Beeson was the slayer of Jim Ross; he had positive proof that Beeson had tried to kill him; and, reasoning from these things, it did not seem improbable that Beeson had murdered Fawnie Lawrence.

He resolved to verify all these supposed facts, and then overwhelm the arch-criminal with them. He had already gathered sufficient evidence to convict Beeson of several high crimes; but he had no direct proof, yet, that Beeson was guilty of murder.

He remembered gratefully the work which had been done for him by Jed Marbury and Mrs. Partridge. They had been his faithful and silent allies; and had collected much invaluable testimony.

As he was striding up and down within the narrow confines of his office, pondering on all these things, he heard a rustling sound at the window.

He looked quickly in the direction, but could see nothing, because of the darkness of the night.

He had lived in constant fear of assassination for many weeks—in fact ever since Beeson's attempted attack on the stage coach—and, half expecting a shot from the window, he dived behind a heavy iron safe.

No shot came. But, instead, the door turned on its hinges, and Broncho Barton walked quietly into the room.

Barton was not a pleasant visitor; but Teamster Tom felt greatly relieved when he saw him. It was safe to assume that Barton was not seeking his life!

It will be remembered that on a previous occasion Barton had imparted valuable information for which Tom had felt grateful; and he was hopeful that the mad stage-driver might now be the bearer of other news that should prove equally serviceable.

"Take a seat," he said, in his blandest way, and with a manner as conciliatory as if Barton had been a person of great importance. "I'm glad to see you to-night. Where have you been keeping yourself all these weeks?"

Barton appeared on the point of speaking, but he made a horrible grimace instead, and, after working his lips a few times, said:

"What's become of Beeson?"

"I thought you might know," was the counter reply.

"You knew a good deal about him the other time you came."

"So I did! So I did!" with a horrible chuckle.

"We run him down that time, didn't we?"

He looked at Laidlaw with a cunning grin, and again worked his lips.

"What did you say?" Tom inquired, thinking he was searching for words with which to express himself, and anxious to aid him.

"I've stayed out in the hills so much that I don't know how to talk," Barton confessed. "The words come and go, come and go; and then, when I think I've got 'em, they float away from me. Did you ever have your words to use you that way?"

"I don't know that I ever did," returning the maniac's steady gaze. "Why do you stay out in the hills? Why don't you come to town here and live?"

A hunted look, that was filled with craft, shone in Barton's face.

"He'd kill me again, if I did!"

"Who kill you?" encouragingly. "Tell me all about it."

He was anxious to get Barton talking, hoping thereby to gain some information of benefit.

"Why, Beeson would. Who else but Beeson? He killed me once; an' he'll do it ag'in, if he gets the chance."

"You seem to be a very lively specimen, now,"

Barton. Don't you think you may be a little bit mistaken about that?"

Barton shook his head most emphatically.

"I reckon I ort to know. I run from him, an' the fellers with him; and he shot me in the back of the head; and I fell over on my face. I reckon I ort to know! for there's the hole, yit!"

He removed his hat and very solemnly bored a forefinger into an imaginary hole in the back of his head.

"Look at that, will you? Could I live with that?"

Teamster Tom was at a loss what to say.

"And Broncho Barton saw him do it, and laughed when he saw me tumble down and lay there!"

Laidlaw was unable to conceal his amazement.

"Broncho Barton?"

"I reckon that's what I said! Broncho Barton an' the other fellers seen him shoot me, an' all of 'em helped him to go through my pockets."

Teamster Tom did not want to offend him by a contradiction, but he could not help exclaiming:

"Oh, now, that couldn't be, you know! You're Broncho Barton; and how could you see Beeson shoot you, and help him to go through your pockets? You're getting things tangled. That might all have been, if you were not Broncho Barton yourself."

"Who says I'm Broncho Barton?" pettishly.

Teamster Tom's amazement increased.

"Who are you, then, if you're not Broncho Barton?"

"Me?" looking up earnestly. "Why, I'm Jim Ross. That is, I would be Jim Ross, if I was living; but as I am dead, you know, I—I don't know what I am. We used to be pards, you know."

This was a staggerer.

"Yes, Jim Ross was my pard," somewhat sorrowfully. "But he's dead."

"Ain't that jist what I've been sayin'? Dead as a herrin'. Shot right hyer in the back of the head."

He again probed the imaginary wound with his forefinger.

Teamster Tom was mystified beyond measure. There was one thing, though, that struck him as strange, and that was the strange coincidence of Broncho's statement with his own views concerning the murder of Jim Ross.

"And after they had killed you, what did they do?" he asked at a venture.

"Why, they divided up the gold-dust and other things that I had, between 'em. They intended to bury me, or hide me, but they thought they heard a comin' stage, an' that skeered 'em away; an' so they left me layin' there."

Teamster Tom began to think that the maniac might know more about the murder of Jim Ross than had ever been supposed; and the thought was forced on him that Barton had probably been lying somewhere in concealment, and had witnessed the perpetration of the crime. Holding this idea in view, he renewed his questions.

As Barton continued to assert that he was dead, Tom, after some skirmishing, again combated the belief.

"How can you be dead, Broncho, and at the same time be sitting here in my office? What is it that makes you think you're dead?"

Barton looked puzzled for a moment, and then brightened.

"It's him that makes me think so. He keeps whispering it to me all the time, an' I can't help but believe him."

"Who?"

"Why, the man up in my head!" impatiently.

"He keeps walkin' around there all the time, and a-whisperin' it to me. I have to believe him. He's told lies to a good many people, I reckon, but he never told any to me; an' I have to believe him!"

This last was uttered with fierce emphasis.

The tangle was growing worse and worse. The madman was leading his hearer on in the maze of his own wild fancies.

"And who is it that does this?" persistently.

"Why, don't you know?" and he seemed surprised.

"How should I?"

The madman seemed for a moment not able to understand this.

"You don't know? Why, it's Broncho Barton, of course!"

It was an odd fancy; and Teamster Tom felt his own brain reel a little as he now, for the first time, fully understood it. The stage-driver believed he was the murdered Jim Ross, and, consequently, dead. He also believed that Broncho Barton, (his own proper self,) was forever walking around and around in the chambers of his brain (which he felt to be the inanimate brain of Jim Ross) and convincing him by continuous whispers that he was no longer in the land of living men.

Teamster Tom could find no words with which to adequately express himself, and so, at a blind venture, he again referred to Beeson.

The result was unexpected and startling. Barton's eyes took on a sudden fire.

"Ah!" he snarled. "I will kill him, yit, jist as he killed me! My revenge ain't half complete. I killed her, because I hated him, and because I thought it would hurt him; and I'll kill him!"

Laidlaw started. He was not aware that Barton had developed murderous tendencies.

"Her? Who's that?"

"Why, I thought you knew! His cousin, Miss Lawrence!"

A terrible look came into the face of Teamster Tom; but he endeavored to calm himself, and huskily asked:

"Tell me, Barton, do you really know anything about her? What became of her, or how she died? Whether she was burnt in the shack?"

His questions almost tumbled over each other in their haste.

"I killed her!" the stage-driver fiercely vociferated. "I burnt her alive, and it was because I hated him! I tied her in the shack and then set fire to it! An' she roasted! She roasted! Ah! it was revenge! Revenge! Ah h!"

The exclamation was almost a shriek of triumph.

It was no sooner uttered, however, than Broncho Barton started back in great terror.

Teamster Tom had sprung up, with eyes blazing and a cry of wrath on his lips, and was rushing toward him as if he meant to strike him to the earth.

But the maniac was too nimble. He swung the door open, and bounded into the darkness; and had disappeared before Tom could get out the revolver for which he was savagely fumbling.

For the moment, Laidlaw was almost as insane as the stage-driver. He leaped through the doorway after the flying figure, but quickly discovered that pursuit was utterly useless.

It was a haggard, unearthly face which the lamp-light fell upon, when he re-entered the office. A face that had grown suddenly and prematurely old. A face filled with the agony of a terrible struggle!

A deep groan broke from the ashen lips; and he reeled, rather than walked to the chair, into which he dropped almost as limply as if the life had been stricken from him.

CHAPTER XXXI.

THE GRIP OF THE LAW.

SMITH FAGGETT, sauntering slowly along one of the principal streets of Chicago, was feeling exceptionally good. He was looking well, too, and the gorgeousness of his attire he felt to be very becoming.

He was almost the only loiterer in the busy street, where scrambling crowds were rushing, as if their lives depended on the haste with which they moved. But Smith Faggett could afford to loiter and enjoy himself.

He was on his homeward way. He had visited the eastern scene of the Myrtle Bostwick mystery, and he had found things there very much to his satisfaction. There had been a little disappointment. The fortune was not so large as he had been led to expect! But it was there, awaiting the coming of Myrtle Bostwick to claim it. He had not failed to assure himself on that point.

He had informed himself of all that was known of Myrtle Bostwick and of the nature of the proofs needed to gain possession of the money. He was certain he could produce these proofs in behalf of his wife.

These were the things that set the smile on the face of Smith Faggett that morning, and distilled into the Chicago air a nectar he had never before known it to possess.

There was much to look at—much to amuse and interest—and he was in a frame fitted for the enjoyment of gazing and strolling.

Chicago was far from an unfamiliar city to him. He had spent several very shady years of his life there, years in which he was in constant terror of the officers.

That was long ago, however, and he had greatly changed since then. He knew that a photograph of his, kept in the select gallery at Police Headquarters, did not at all resemble him, now; and therefore he had little fear of being recognized and his pleasures spoiled by the interference of the hated police.

But Smith Faggett did not give the Chicago officers due credit for their lynx-eyed sagacity; as he was soon to find, to his bitter regret.

His saunterings were brought to an abrupt termination by the descent of a heavy hand on his shoulder; and, turning quickly about, he saw before him the dreaded badge and uniform of a minion of the law.

There was no power in Smith Faggett's nature to prevent a cringing, tell-tale shrinking. He cowered for a moment, like a spaniel under the blow of the lash. But this vanished almost instantly, and he was again himself, as smiling and serenely innocent in appearance as ever.

"I guess you'll have to come along with me," said the officer. "I think you're wanted."

"I reckon, now, you're mistaken in your man," Faggett averred. "Who do you take me for, anyway?"

"Smith Faggett," was the startling reply. "Wanted these ten years for forgery and highway robbery."

Faggett assumed a look of indignant virtue. Although the officer was watching him closely, not for a moment did he see anything to indicate that Faggett had ever heard the name. But he remembered the cowering look into which Faggett had been surprised, and was not to be bluffed into freeing his man.

"I'm glad to be able to tell you, then," Faggett retorted, "that I don't know anything about this man you speak of. I don't think I ever heard the name before. My name is Conover, sir; William G. Conover."

"Where from?"

Faggett was prepared for the question.

"I don't object to telling you, though I don't know that it's any of your business. You policemen, sir, seem to think you own the city, and all the people in it. Where am I from, sir? I'm from New York."

So far as the officer knew this might be so, and still the man be Smith Faggett.

"You'll have to come along with me, anyway. If you can prove what you say, there'll be no harm done."

Faggett had not been in the city long; but he had already visited a hotel, and there registered as William G. Conover, of New York. Something of the kind was always a safe thing to do, and he always did it. On more than one occasion he had escaped serious entanglement by this little device.

"You'll find out your mistake, sir!" he declared, with an assumption of injured dignity.

He saw he could not evade a visit to the police station, and that it would be unwise to fight against it; and so, with the air of a man who has been badly maligned, and who believes he will have no difficulty in clearing his character, he walked along at the policeman's side.

In spite of this outward show of offended pride, he felt an uneasy sinking. From previous experience he was mortally sure that he would be searched; and, alas! there was in one of his pockets a letter, on whose envelope was unmistakably the name of Smith Faggett, of Shoshone.

A criminal cannot always escape. There is sure to come a day of retribution; and in many instances their own undoing is accomplished by such simple slips of forgetfulness as this.

He endeavored in a dozen ways to distract the officer's attention, and thus gain an opportunity to drop out the letter or destroy it, but the officer's eyes were constantly on him. And when he arrived at the station he was outwardly calm, but inwardly in the depths of despair.

When the letter was found, as he had so feared it would be, he saw there was no further use for subterfuge, and became sullenly defiant.

"What if I am Smith Faggett!" he growled. "I never committed the things you charge me with. I was a little tough, once, but I can prove to you, sirs, that I have been honorably engaged for a long time. I live in Shoshone, Dakota, and have an excellent reputation there; and I can bring a host of witnesses to prove my good character. I consider this whole business an outrage."

"Why did you deny your identity, then?" was the quiet question.

"Because of what I knew you had booked against me here. I didn't want to get into any trouble, and be compelled to hire lawyers and bring on witnesses to prove my claims. That's why. It's a good enough reason, ain't it?"

Even yet, Faggett had a dim hope that he might be able to bluster the thing through and secure his release; but the hope proved groundless, and he was sent to prison to await an investigation and preliminary hearing.

The prison walls had not closed behind him, however, before he was already trying to evolve a plan of escape; and even the clanging of the heavy iron door, ponderous and immovable as it seemed, did not stop this. He had been in difficult straits before, and got out of them, and he reasoned that he might be able to do the same now.

The prison was crowded, and he was placed in a cell with another; and when he saw who this man was, his courage began to rise. It was an old and hardened criminal known as Tylar Fox. Tylar Fox had "done time" more than once, and now he was again in the toils.

In those old days, which Faggett seldom liked to think of, he and Fox had been cronies and accomplices. But Fox had been sent to the Penitentiary at Joliet, and Faggett had fled for safety to the wilderness of the West. Since then, they had not met until now.

Fox was somewhat altered and broken, but Faggett immediately recognized him, although Fox did not know Faggett until informed who his new cell-mate was.

"Shake!" said Fox. "We're in the same boat ag'in. I thought you'd gone out West an' reformed. Our luck's down on both of us, it seems."

"I don't know so much about that," Faggett returned, taking a seat beside him on the cot. "I never was in the habit of giving up, you know. Maybe we can make a break of it, somehow."

Fox, who had been very despondent, brightened a little.

"I don't know about that. I hain't seen any

show, myself; but you always was better than me at sich things. I remember well when you broke out of the jail down at Aurora. That was a cute trick."

"You want to be careful how you speak about that," Faggett cautioned. "I am playing innocent here, and besides, I was sailing then under an alias; a fact I don't think the officers ever tumbled to. It was Tobias Simpson that broke out of the jail at Aurora!"

He smiled grimly, and Tylar Fox indulged in a hoarse laugh.

"What's your plans, if you've got any?"

"The only thing I've been able to think of, so far, is for us to jump on the turnkey when he brings us our suppers, and then do the best we know how to get out of here."

"I'm afraid it won't work," said Tylar, somewhat gloomily. "I've got a chunk of lead in my leg now, that I once got in tryin' to run a game like that."

"Hush!"

There was some one approaching along the narrow passage, and Faggett laid a hand warningly on Fox's arm.

It was only a passing guard, but the sight of him caused them to lower their voices and continue their conversation in a more subdued whisper.

CHAPTER XXXII.

IN THE WARDS OF A HOSPITAL.

How Fawnie Lawrence reached Chicago, she knew but vaguely. But she did arrive there; and was found one evening, wandering the streets in a delirium of fever, and entirely penniless.

She was conveyed to a hospital, and received the best of attention from skilled physicians and trained nurses.

Her vitality was so exhausted and the fever had taken such strong hold on her, however, that for many days she tossed and moaned unconsciously on her bed of pain.

During this season, the only word to which she was ever heard to give utterance was the name of Laidlaw. There were sometimes unintelligible sentences connected with this name, but the listening nurses could make nothing of them.

There chanced to be some Laidlaws in Chicago, as shown by the Directory, and these were visited or written to; but they knew nothing whatever concerning her; and so her identity promised to be a mystery, only to be revealed on her recovery, or sealed forever, if she died.

It was a question in those long days which of these was to be her fate.

But her excellent constitution enabled her to fight out the furious battle; and one day the physician was pleased to announce confidently that she would recover. Still, after this, it was more than a week before she rallied sufficiently to take any interest in what was transpiring about her.

But with this returning of consciousness her mind was cleared of the fogs that had so long shrouded it, and the light of perfect sanity was in her eyes.

She was naturally puzzled to account for her position and state. For a time her memory of the terrible events which occurred during her period of mental alienation was a blank. But various incidents began to obtrude; and bit by bit a recollection of those horrible days and weeks returned to her, and were spread out before her mental vision like a grotesque and terrible panorama.

There was a weakness of mind and body that kept her from dwelling too long on these things; which was well, for she would not have been able to stand a continuous pondering on the dreadful subject.

Whenever she approached it, in her blind gropings after the truth, she shuddered.

But the whole facts being known to her, finally, and her strength being much improved, she ventured to speak to the nurse of these things.

Her story was so strange, however, that the nurse fancied she was still flighty; and, instead of heeding what Fawnie said, only strove to soothe and divert her.

Fawnie was not equal to the task of argument, and meekly yielded the point.

One of the nurses read to her at times, little amusing scraps out of the newspapers; and at one of these papers Fawnie glanced curiously one morning. The nurse had dropped it on the bed and gone into another part of the building.

Fawnie started up with a little cry, when she saw prominently displayed in bold, black letters, at the top of a series of headlines, the name: SMITH FAGGETT.

The sight was sufficient to awaken her keenest interest.

What was Smith Faggett doing in Chicago, and why was his name there?

She put out a thin hand for the paper; and drawing it to her, eagerly read the headings, and then then the body of the article.

It was the story of Smith Faggett's arrest and imprisonment, with an account of the crimes charged against him. It stated that he was in prison, and his conviction was a matter of certainty.

As Fawnie had never had any knowledge of Smith Faggett's dual character, and therefore had always considered him an honorable gentleman whom she ought to like, but could not, she was much astonished at these statements. Even more astonished by them than by his being in Chicago.

The nurse came back, shortly; and Fawnie, pointing to the account, requested her to read it aloud.

This the nurse was loth to do; but when Fawnie insisted, she complied, stopping occasionally and glancing at Fawnie, who was lying very still and white-faced, with closed eyes.

"I know that man," said Fawnie, looking at the wondering nurse. "I knew him in Shoshone, out in the Black Hills country."

The good woman was almost shocked. She had begun to think a great deal of Fawnie, and this avowal of acquaintanceship with such a man as Faggett was represented to be was not a favorable indication.

Fawnie read something of her thoughts in her eyes, and made a quiet explanation.

Although much excited by what she had read and heard, she was too weak to be otherwise than quiet and undemonstrative. But a hectic flush burned in either cheek, and her eyes were very bright; points which did not escape the nurse's attention.

"I don't think you ought to talk so much," the nurse gently admonished.

"I must!" Fawnie implored. "You must let me tell you about these things. I feel that I shall die, if you don't. I've just got to talk to somebody! Dear nurse, I've been very patient! and now, you must let me speak of these things!"

The nurse saw that it would do more harm to deny this petition than to grant it; and so complied.

Fawnie ran in a hasty, sketchy way over that portion of her personal history which had been crowding uppermost in her thoughts. She touched on all the principal events occurring immediately before and after the burning of the shack.

The nurse, forgetful of her own admonitions, listened with rapt attention; and when Fawnie concluded, breathed a deep sigh of astonishment and relief.

"This is all true, dear nurse! Every word of it!" thinking the nurse's manner indicated doubt. "My mind was clouded, but it's clear enough, now! I assure you, I know just what I'm talking about."

"And now, I want you to do me a favor. I will dictate a letter; and when you have written it, cut this account out of the paper, and send it, with the letter, to Lawrence Beeson, Shoshone, Dakota."

In her letter Fawnie informed Beeson of her whereabouts and condition; how she came to be there; and urged him to come to her assistance, or to send her money.

It was a very long letter, for it had to deal with the entire history since her last parting with him. But it was finished and sealed at last; and was posted by the nurse.

When that good woman returned, somewhat anxious for the effect of all this excitement, she was gratified at finding Fawnie sleeping like a child.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

A STUNNING BLOW.

FAGGETT's first day's conversation with Tylar Fox was barren of results. But this did not prevent the two worthies from renewing their talk from time to time; and on the second day of Faggett's incarceration, they were deep in a most promising scheme, when they were interrupted by the coming of the jailer.

This gentleman was the bearer of a most astounding request; a request which, while it overwhelmed Faggett with astonishment, caused his heart to bound with joy.

Fawnie Lawrence had had another talk with the nurse; after which the physician in charge of the hospital had been called in; the whole resulting in the physician making a visit to the chief of police.

Fawnie desired to see Smith Faggett, and became almost frantic at the suggestion that she ought not think of it. The physician believed less harm would come from the interview than from a refusal; and his influence had induced the chief of police to grant Faggett permission to visit Miss Lawrence at the hospital, under the guardianship and guidance of an officer.

Faggett's bewilderment and astonishment arose from the fact that he sincerely believed Fawnie Lawrence had perished in the fire. His joy came because of the hope of escape which the visit held out.

After his customary manner, he concealed as much as possible his tumultuous thoughts beneath an impenetrable facial mask. The jailer could scarcely have told whether he was pleased or displeased with the summons.

"This will knock some plans sky high, I'm afraid!" Faggett thought, while preparations were being made for the trip. "What about this Myrtle Bostwick fortune?"

The question brought unpleasant reflections. Fawnie Lawrence might aid Beeson in setting up his claim in her behalf, and that would greatly jeopardize the claim of Faggett's wife.

But he was not given much time for thought. The preparations were of the simplest; consisting only in the attachment of some heavy and inconvenient ornaments to his wrists and ankles.

Faggett could not repress a frown of displeasure as he held out his wrists for the handcuffs.

"No breaks, now, mind you!" the jailer warned. "If you do, you know the consequences!"

With this, he significantly tapped his hidden revolver, and motioned Faggett to advance before him toward the outer door of the prison.

The skies had never seemed so bright, nor the air so sweet, as on that morning, when Smith Faggett heard the heavy jail door close behind him. He was out in the open sunshine; and that was something; even though manacled like the desperate felon he was.

There seemed small likelihood he could make his escape, but this release from his close confinement seemed to Faggett a long step in that direction.

A closed cab was in waiting to receive them, and in it they were driven rapidly away.

After a long time, they got out of the cab; and then Faggett walked before the officer into the hospital yard, and on into the big building itself.

During the trip thither, Faggett had been doing some serious thinking in his own erratic fashion. It was a fault of Faggett's schemes that he usually forgot or neglected some very important detail. This was especially true whenever he was compelled to think quickly, and under pressure. In this case, he was already overlooking the fact that he believed his own proofs much stronger than any Lawrence Beeson could produce. Perhaps this may have been caused by his great anxiety, and by the shock given him by the knowledge that Fawnie Lawrence was alive.

He was prepared for the interview, when shown into the hospital ward where the rapidly convalescing girl was lying, propped up by pillows.

She smiled faintly when she saw him enter. It seemed so good to see any one from Shoshone! And this caused her to overlook, for the time being, Faggett's clanking shackles. But the smile faded, when she spoke to him, and he stared blankly at her.

"I'm so glad to see you, Mr. Faggett!" she said, looking anxiously into his face, when he had been brought to the bedside. "I want to talk to you about Shoshone and the people there. You were there when I left, and must know a good many things that I'd like to hear."

Still Faggett stared blankly.

"I beg pardon, ma'am," he said, "but—I don't really ever remember of having seen you in Shoshone."

He would have denied that he had ever been at Shoshone, himself, only that he knew he would quickly be tripped up in that lie by the officer; and so, in furtherance of his scheme, and with an eye still to the Myrtle Bostwick fortune, he proceeded to deny that he had ever seen Fawnie there.

Faggett's plan took no thought of what the effect of this might be on the anxious girl. He only fancied that it would be to his interest to ignore and dispute her acquaintanceship. If he could by any means prevent her from ever returning to Shoshone, or could make Beeson think her an impostor who should not be allowed to come there, he thought to accomplish a stroke of great genius.

A look of bewildered pain came into Fawnie's countenance when she caught Faggett's heartless words. But her face cleared directly, and she exclaimed eagerly:

"Oh, you must remember me, Mr. Faggett! I suppose I have changed so that I couldn't expect you to recognize me at the first glance. I'm so thin and white; and they cut my hair off while the fever was so bad; and I don't suppose I look anything like I used to. But you'll remember me, when I tell you I'm Fawnie Lawrence!"

She was so anxious to see a smile of recognition on his face that she spoke with almost indistinct rapidity. Her manner was so wistful, too, so pleading and pathetic, that the nurse was in tears, and even the officer felt a huge lump rising in his throat.

But the calloused villain to whom she was speaking, showed not a sign. He was resolved to harden his heart against her, and maintain his position to the end.

"I don't know," he said. "I wish I did, for your sake; but unfortunately I don't."

Fawnie Lawrence's brain reeled under this denial, and she questioned whether or not she had really regained her mind.

She knew Smith Faggett was standing before her; for in all those weeks he had changed but little. And yet he was stoutly declaring he had never beheld her and knew nothing of her. There were only two explanations: She was not in her right mind; or Smith Faggett had some

reason for this deception. The very absence of any cause—for she could think of none—was what bewildered her. Why should Smith Faggett deny their acquaintanceship?

"Why, Mr. Faggett, you must remember me! Surely, you remember me! Don't you recall Fawnie Lawrence? the cousin of Lawrence Beeson? Don't you remember how you came up to our house night after night to visit Miss Rudiger?"

"I know Fawnie Lawrence well enough," he replied, shaking his head skeptically. "I know Fawnie Lawrence well enough, but you're not Fawnie Lawrence!"

He had meant to deny even an acquaintanceship with Fawnie Lawrence; but the thought struck him that this might not be wise, for his deception would be revealed should the hospital people write to Shoshone, which he knew they were reasonably sure to do.

Fawnie pressed her hands to her head, as if thereby to still the painful throbbing of her brain.

"Fawnie Lawrence is dead!" he said, doggedly. "That's why I know you can't be Fawnie Lawrence! And I'd know it, anyway, for you don't look like her."

"But remember how I've changed!" she urged.

"You never could have looked like her!" he stoutly persisted.

Fawnie broke into a fit of sobbing; and Faggett turned uneasily to the people standing by.

"I tell you what, ladies and gents," he said, "there's only one of two things. That girl's as crazy a lunatic as ever lived, or she's an impostor. I knew Fawnie Lawrence, of Shoshone. She lost her life in a fire sometime ago. The whole thing was published in the papers at the time, so that anybody could know all about it; and it's my honest belief that this young lady is pretending to be her to get the money she thinks may have belonged to Miss Lawrence. Either that, or she's crazy!"

The anxious nurse, who had watched the interview with constantly growing displeasure, had sprung to Fawnie's side, and was now using her utmost endeavors to quiet her. In these efforts to calm her she spoke loudly, to shut out Faggett's words from Fawnie's ears. She did not succeed wholly, as she saw.

Fawnie's eyes were dilated with an intense horror, and filled with a fire that burned out the tears. She stared at the nurse and pressed her hands to her head.

"My God! I'm still crazy, I guess!" she exclaimed.

And then she gave herself up to the nurse's caresses, and once more sobbed and wept in a hysterical and delirious way.

Which spoke the truth was a thing the officer and witnesses could not determine, but it was plain to the dullest comprehension that Faggett ought not longer remain in the room.

So he was conducted out again, and the place was vacated by all save Fawnie and the nurse.

The painful interview had so wrought on the officer that he was in a somewhat distracted state; and this was taken advantage of by the ever-watchful Faggett.

The hospital was in a quiet part of the city, purposely removed for the sake of the inmates away from the uproar and bustle of the busy streets. This was a thing favorable to Faggett's desires.

He saw the driver of the cab seated on a curbstone, flicking aimlessly with his whip at the few spires of grass that dared venture to grow there, and wholly intent on this. The cab-horses were standing quietly near the curb.

It required all of Faggett's immense self-control to conceal his sudden hope from the officer. But in the most unconcerned manner he walked at the officer's side toward the cab.

Then, just as the driver was starting up, Faggett wheeled with lightning-like quickness, and struck the officer to the earth with a blow from his manacled hands, and that individual rolled senseless against the curbing.

Before the astonished driver could comprehend what had occurred, Faggett had clambered to the seat; and, getting hold of the lines, started the horses by shouting at them, and in some manner managed to guide them in spite of the incumbering handcuffs.

Being a quiet street, it was not crowded with pedestrians and vehicles; and, as the horses trotted briskly and willingly away, going straight down it without needing any guidance, Faggett's hopes rose still higher.

He was thoroughly acquainted with the neighborhood, and felt sure that if he could reach a certain alley only a block away, and could have but a minute or two to spare, his chances would be extremely good.

The driver ran after the cab, shouting "Police!" at the top of his voice, and was succeeding in rapidly drawing a crowd. But the short time necessary to traverse the distance of a block was greatly in Faggett's favor; and before the bewildered people could fairly comprehend what was the matter and what was desired of them, the cab had covered the distance, Faggett had scrambled down from the seat, and had vanished.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

A COUPLE OF LETTERS.

LAWRENCE BEESON was treated to a genuine surprise by the contents of two letters, which he received in the same morning's mail. One of them was from Smith Faggett; and the other from Fawnie Lawrence.

Fawnie's letter had started on its western journey a day earlier than Faggett's, but by reason of a delay on the stage trail, Faggett's had overtaken it at Deadwood; and both had come to Shoshone in the same pouch.

A queer look rested on Beeson's face, as he opened the letter written by the nurse. Its preliminary statements were not clear to him—in fact rather puzzling—and he turned to the name at the bottom to learn who the writer was.

The shock he received at the sight of the signature caused his face to pale and a look of wild astonishment to appear in his eyes.

He drew a deep breath, uttered a wondering exclamation, and hastily scanned the letter's contents.

There could be no doubt that it purported to come from Fawnie Lawrence; and, having thus scanned it, he read it through with excited eagerness; and then he read it again and again, as if unable to believe the story there told.

It was a strange story!

He did not touch his other mail for a long time; but sat quietly in his big office chair, glancing occasionally at the letter, and thinking.

"Well!"

With this, he roused himself; and in a perfunctory and inattentive way turned to his other letters.

The handwriting on one attracted his attention, and he opened it first. It was from Smith Faggett.

In its way, it was quite as strange as the letter from Fawnie Lawrence.

As he wheeled about in his chair, the envelope of Fawnie's letter was brushed from the table where he had deposited it. The clipping from the Chicago daily, which had been in the envelope, and which he had not noticed, dropped out on the floor; and, falling open, Smith Faggett's name in the headlines was displayed.

It was a morning of surprises. He stared at the black letters in amazement. Then picked up the clipping and read the headline.

"Well!" he again ejaculated. "Faggett's got into trouble! I suppose the letter will explain fully."

He had only glanced at it before his attention was drawn by the clipping.

Now he returned to it with renewed interest.

"He's give 'em the flip!" he cried, his eyes shining with a subdued admiration.

He did not like Faggett, but this trick of his pleased him, for he had the rascal's instinctive hatred of all officers of the law, and was pleased when any one got the best of them.

Faggett's letter gave a detailed account of his escape and flight, and of his plans; all of which formed very interesting reading. Its perusal did not excite him as did the reading of Fawnie's letter; but for all that, he went over it again and again with eager interest.

According to Faggett's account of his adventures, when he leaped into the alley, he hastened for a convenient coal-hole in the rear of one of the big buildings; and, dropping through this, crept into a cellar.

He could not travel fast, because of his manacles, but he succeeded in gaining the cellar before the pursuing party reached the opening into the alley.

He knew the house above was occupied by an old friend of his, on whom he could rely for concealment. And while the excited people were rushing up and down the street and alley, looking for him in all sorts of impossible places, he made his way up into the building and presented himself before his friend.

Luckily for him, the man immediately recognized him. He had read the report in the papers; and Faggett's irons revealed his needs and his distress.

The man showed his friendship by so concealing Faggett that the officers had not, at the time of the writing, been able to discover his whereabouts. He was still in this place of hiding; and it had only been after much persuasion that his friend had consented to mail this letter for him.

He reported himself as doing well, physically, though chafing under the imprisonment.

His irons had been removed the first night by the aid of a file in the hands of this friend.

He said, too, that if nothing prevented, he meant to start for Shoshone in disguise, at the earliest moment that might be deemed safe.

But this story, interesting as it was, was not what Beeson dwelt on longest. There was another portion of much deeper and more interest. That was the report referring to Fawnie Lawrence.

This was what most struck him:

"The young woman who claims to be Fawnie Lawrence resembles y'ur dead niece—a good deal. But when I heard her story, I knew in a minute she was an impostor. She has something of Fawnie's fea-

tures, but her hair is nothing like Fawnie's; and she is much whiter and of a different complexion.

"Of course, knowing that Fawnie had lost her life in the shack, I was prepared for her pretenses. I questioned her pretty closely; and as a result, I could tell she was lying. Now I don't know why she should want to play that game, unless it is that she thinks Fawnie had some money back in Shoshone, which she hopes to get.

"I only write this to warn you and put you on your guard in case she should really try that."

"Thank you for your kindness!" and Beeson's lips curled scornfully. "You're a very smart man, Faggett; but you can't fool me."

The surprising information contained in the first part of the letter was given a reason for its communication by this. Faggett felt he would serve his own ends by writing this warning, and he feared to write only that much and conceal everything else.

He knew that Chicago papers circulated in the Black Hills to some extent, and that even if Beeson should never see the particular Chicago dailies which made mention of the arrest, he might stumble across notices of it elsewhere, for the affair was likely to get into the telegraphic columns.

Hence, he felt he could not suppress the facts of his arrest and imprisonment, and that, therefore, it would be best to make a clean breast of the whole thing.

The letters had yielded such a mine of information, that Beeson turned to those not yet opened, feeling that each one of them must surely contain a surprise. But they were all on ordinary affairs of business, and he only gave each a glance.

Then he settled back again in his easy-chair and carefully re-read the letter which had come from Fawnie. Although not in her handwriting, it bore unmistakable signs of genuineness. There was something in the story and in the way in which it was told that convinced him of its truth.

He put it down at last, stared abstractedly at the floor, and pulled hard at his mustache. While he did not believe Faggett's theory of the girl in the hospital, yet the part of Faggett's letter pertaining to this was full of suggestion.

He opened a drawer of his desk and took another communication therefrom. It was from the detective he had employed to follow Faggett to the East, and contained a complete account of all that gentleman's discoveries. It had been received several days before, and was very hopeful in its statements concerning Beeson's chances of obtaining the money which was coming to Myrtle Bostwick.

Beeson thought now he understood why Smith Faggett did not want Fawnie to reappear on the scene, and he began to realize that if Faggett had reasons for wishing her to remain away from Shoshone, he had even greater reasons.

He had sought to gain possession of this money through a marriage with Fawnie, but time and again he had been rejected by her and his advances discouraged. There was little hope that he could expect anything better in the future. And if Fawnie returned, and the fortune was obtained for her, he could not come into it so long as she remained alive.

These were the thoughts that ran darkly through his brain as he perused the detective's report.

"I guess she's an impostor!" and he smiled grimly and forbiddingly. "She's an impostor, and must be crushed for her impertinence! If I refuse to send her money, she can't very well leave Chicago; and—she will not try to come here!"

He knew Fawnie's character well enough to know that if he turned a deaf ear to her appeal and pretended disbelief in her story, she would be so crushed thereby she would never endeavor to make her way to him. Her independence of spirit would assert itself, and she would slave for her bread, or for a mere pittance, in the heart of the great city before she would appeal to him again.

"I reckon I'll have to write to the hospital people and denounce her as a fraud or a lunatic!" that unpleasant look still on his face. "I can claim that indubitable evidence of the death of the real Fawnie Lawrence was revealed in ashes of the shack."

His face grew still darker with the fear that she might venture to Shoshone anyway, thinking it her duty to clear up this error. Fawnie was a great devotee to duty!

He could try the plan, however, and accept the inevitable when it became necessary. Perhaps the harshness with which he meant to word his letter to the hospital people might completely deter her from the contemplation of a return.

And having come to this conclusion, he put away the letters, and prepared to write his reply.

CHAPTER XXXV.

IN THE HILLS.

TEAMSTER TOM, assisted by Jed Marbury, had kept up a constant searching and watching, with a view of surprising and capturing the road-agents at their secret rendezvous in the hills.

These gentry, however, had abandoned the crow's nest, and no longer resorted to it on any

occasion. On a number of nights, Jed and Teamster Tom, by turns, had watched the crow's nest through the long, dark hours; and had always been forced to come away not a whit the wiser.

But one day Jed Marbury overheard a scrap of conversation between two men in Mrs. Partridge's restaurant, which he carefully treasured and conveyed to Teamster Tom. The latter believed there was more in it than appeared on the surface of the words.

All Jed had clearly understood was:

"To-night! below the shattered pine!"

Neither Jed nor Teamster Tom might have given these words much thought, had not the men been notorious characters, whom they had long suspected of being members of the road-agent band.

So regarding them, the words were given deep significance.

There were several shattered pines on the surrounding hills; but the most prominent, and the one they believed was referred to, was on the rim of a deep and rocky draw about two miles from the town. The place seemed peculiarly fitted for a conference of evil men, as it was far from the trail, and in a region little visited.

Teamster Tom had important business to look after that night, and so he delegated Jed Marbury to visit the place indicated and learn what he could. If it was found the road-agents had chosen that as their meeting-place, it was Tom's desire and intention to surround them some dark night, when Beeson was known to be in their midst, and capture the entire outfit.

To be perfectly sure they were not mistaken in the pine mentioned by the men, Marbury kept his weather eye on these individuals throughout the day; and on the coming of night, shadowed them persistently.

He was sure he was right, and became much excited, when, about ten o'clock, the two men left the town in a very surreptitious manner.

Jed was close on their heels, creeping along with the wily agility and silence of an Indian. He realized the extreme danger of his position. A discovery might result disastrously. He was certain to be pursued, in that event, and might be shot.

But Marbury recked little of this, caring only to be of service to Teamster Tom, and anxious to bring the miscreants to justice.

The men chose a somewhat roundabout course until the town was left behind them, and then bore straight away in the direction of the shattered pine. They walked rapidly, now, and it was with much difficulty the ex-stage-driver could keep them in view. In spite of his utmost endeavors, they disappeared occasionally, owing to the fact that he was compelled to proceed with extreme caution; but he always brought them in sight, on reaching higher ground.

He was not so fearful, now, that they would evade him, being well satisfied by this time that they were going by the shortest route to the rendezvous. Should they vanish altogether, he felt sure he would see them again on reaching that place.

When the vicinity of the shattered pine was gained, he stopped for a time, and then went forward very slowly, that he might not stumble unawares into the midst of the road-agents.

He could hear nothing, except those summer sounds of the wilderness which always strike so forcibly on strained ears. But when he gained the foot of the pine and writhed shadow-like along the rim of the draw, the sounds of voices floated up to him from the hollow just beyond.

By a little listening he could tell there were only three men there, two of them being the ones he had pursued. He knew by this he was early, and judged the others would probably not reach the rendezvous before midnight. In any event, there would not be a long wait, for the hour of twelve was rapidly approaching.

Not knowing by what way the outlaws entered this place of retreat, and fearing some of the in-comers might stumble over his prostrate body, he crawled further along the ridge, until he found a securer hiding-place.

He had barely done this, when one of the road-agents produced and lighted a dark lantern, whose light fairly well illuminated the hollow where they were grouped. He could not make out their faces, however; though he was sure of the men he had followed, and believed he recognized the voice of the third.

Jed was in a state of great jubilation. The discovery of this retreat promised great things, and he resolved not to spoil any of Laidlaw's plans by an act of indiscretion. They had hunted long and earnestly for it!

In a little while he heard other voices, accompanied by footsteps; and Beeson and a number of associates advanced into the draw. They did not pass near Marbury, but came in from a southerly direction.

Marbury was in a good position both for seeing and hearing, and he made the most of his advantage when the real work of the conference began. But he was not destined to learn much, for there came a sudden and startling interruption.

Beeson was on his feet, speaking to the crowd congregated before him, and intent only on that. His back was toward the southern rim of the

hollow, from which he was distant only a few feet.

Without any premonitory warning, a screeching and angry yell rent the air, and the form of a man was seen to leap from the ridge straight at Beeson. There was a knife in the man's hand, which shone dimly in the faint moonlight; and as soon as the man struck the earth, he rushed at Beeson with unparalleled ferocity.

Jed recognized his assailant by his cry. It was Broncho Barton, the maniac stage-driver. Broncho Barton who, with an insane recklessness, was endeavoring to slay the man whom he so curiously believed to be his murderer.

Marbury was so excited at the sight, and by the combat which immediately followed, that he could hardly remain quietly in his hiding-place. He wanted to leap up and yell, and give vent to his feelings.

"It's dog eat dog!" he muttered, staring at the combatants. "T'other's about as bad as which. If they both kill each other, I reckon the world'll be better off. Go in, lemons! I hopes you'll both git squeezed!"

But Broncho Barton's chances of slaying Lawrence Beeson were necessarily not very good. Had he fired at Beeson from the hill, he would have shown more wisdom; but to thus attack him in the midst of the associate outlaws, was a rashness worthy of a madman.

Beeson parried the knife-thrusts aimed at him by Barton. At the same time he shouted for assistance; and the road-agents, who had been greatly startled by the cry, and by Barton's sudden intrusion among them, rallied to their chief's aid.

Jed Marbury saw the maniac stricken down, and supposed he was killed. But Barton sprang up almost immediately; and, seeming to realize his peril, tore himself loose from the detaining hands of the outlaws, and bounded with great nimbleness up the slope.

Jed could scarcely repress a cry, when he saw that the madman in his flight would pass very near him, if not over him. This would endanger his own safety, he knew, for it was reasonably certain the road-agents would follow Barton in hot haste.

The maniac had gained the top of the ridge and was only a foot or two from Jed's hiding-place, when a volley of shots rung out from the hollow. Barton pitched forward, as if fatally stricken, tumbling almost into Jed's arms.

"Hyer's a go!" Jed whispered, in great excitement, uncertain what to do.

He feared to leap up and fly, for that might be to bring the same fate on himself; and to allow Barton to lie there result in his own discovery, he thought.

The little niche, or pocket-like hole, in which he was sitting, extended backward into a small shelf-covered cavern; and on the impulse of the moment, he grasped the fallen stage-driver and drew him back into this place.

While engaged in this, Jed could not tell whether Broncho Barton was dead or alive. Broncho did not stir or make any noise; which was a fortunate thing for Jed, as the outlaws were already clambering up the slope.

It was very dark up there, and the gloom in the pocket where Jed was was impenetrable.

Jed felt he was in a tight place, as he listened to the pantings and exclamations of the outlaws, and he sincerely wished he had allowed Broncho Barton to remain, and had crept back there alone. He could hardly tell why he had drawn Broncho in with him; for now, on cooler reflection, he felt the unwisdom of the act.

But when Broncho moved slightly, and Jed knew he was not dead, and at the same moment those fiendish, murderous cries reached him, he was not sorry to have done as he did. He did not like Broncho, and he knew of the crime committed by Broncho against Fawnie Lawrence; but Broncho had struck at Beeson, the common enemy—a point much in his favor!—and besides, he was only a poor, crazed creature whom it seemed a natural duty to protect.

Jed's fears now arose as much for Broncho's safety as for his own! And when he heard the hurried footsteps of the pursuers so near, he drew his revolver, resolved to defend himself and the wounded maniac till the last.

But the outlaws, owing to the darkness, had not seen Broncho Barton fall. Their volley had been a wild and random one, fired in the general direction taken by him; and now, as they hurried on in this pursuit, they dashed by Marbury's place of concealment, without once looking to the right or the left.

Jed almost held his breath in suspense, and he had his free hand ready to place over Barton's mouth should the maniac try to cry out.

The cursing outlaws, however, continued on down the slope in chase of their imaginary fugitive, leaving Marbury to breathe more freely.

He knew they would return, shortly, and feared they might make a search of the ridge; in which case he would be better off away from there.

He could not think of leaving Broncho to be found and slain by these men; and so, as soon as he thought it safe to make a movement, he crept from the niche, drew the injured man out after him; and then, shouldering the unwieldy

burden, half-crawled and half-staggered away from the perilous spot.

He reached a point of greater security before the return of the road-agents to the ridge. He could hear them swearing in a way to make the leaves of the trees turn pale, and enjoyed their discomfiture.

"Go it!" he muttered. "You're Satan's own band; and you're true to your master!"

Now that he felt he might do so without danger, and could devote the necessary time to it, he made an examination of Broncho's injuries.

The madman had been struck on the side of the head by a pistol bullet, but it had been a glancing shot. The wound was bleeding profusely, and Marbury knew his hands and clothing were wet with the maniac's blood. He knew, too, when he had completed the examination, that Broncho Barton would live, and that in a few days he would be all right and in as good a condition as before.

"They'd 'a' done ye up, though, Broncho, I'm thinkin' if I hadn't drawed ye out of their path. I can't say as I'm sorry I helped ye, even if ye have done some mighty black things. I reckon, on account o' yer head, they'll not be held ag'in' you in the Judgment; and for the same reason I'm glad I snaked you out o' there!"

Barton was stirring uneasily. At this, Jed lifted him again and bore him far down the slope, only placing his burden down when he could no longer stagger under it.

Feeling he was securely screened here from view of the outlaws on the ridge and in the draw, he struck a match and flashed its light into Barton's face and on his wound.

Barton's eyes were closed and on his face there was a deathly pallor. He was wholly unconscious; and Jed, skilled in such things, saw that he was likely to remain in that condition for a long time.

"I reckon I'd better hurry on to town, an' git help," was his thought, as the match flickered out, leaving him once more in the darkness. "I can't carry him that fur; an' he ort to have that head looked after. Yes; I'll risk it, an' go to town. If he gits up an' wanders off! But he won't go fur, in that shapel! The only thing is, the agents may git him, in that case!"

He did not like to leave Broncho Barton there, but he saw it was the wisest and best thing to be done under the circumstances; and, after making the wounded man as comfortable as possible, he set out for Shoshone with all speed.

Now that he did not have to creep fearfully along, he covered the distance in much shorter time.

Although the hour was late, he found Teamster Tom still in the office; and in a few words acquainted him with the discoveries and happenings of the night.

Laidlaw was fully as kind-hearted and forgiving in disposition as Marbury, and readily conceded that Broncho ought to be brought in and his injury attended to; and agreed to accompany Marbury back for that purpose.

He had been given much time to think over Barton's dark act at the shack.

As the act of a madman, he could forgive it, even if he could never forget it. Barton was not to be blamed for his hallucinations, nor for his murderous tendencies.

But there was one thing: Barton ought to be placed where he could do no further injury, and where he could be given proper care and medical attention. The opportunity to accomplish this now seemed to offer.

Hence it was that Teamster Tom went very willingly with Jed Marbury to the point where Barton had been left.

Marbury had no difficulty in finding his way there, in spite of the character of the country and the darkness of the night, being too good a borderman to lose himself or his way, even under such circumstances.

Barton appeared not to have stirred from his position during all Jed's absence. He was still unconscious and breathing stertorously.

Laidlaw was anxious to know if the outlaws were still in the draw; and, leaving Broncho in Marbury's care, he continued on to that point.

He was disappointed to find them gone.

Whether they had been frightened away by Barton's attack, or whether they had departed because their business was completed, he had no means of knowing. He made sure they were not there; and then returned to Marbury and Broncho.

A rude stretcher had been brought from Teamster Tom's office; and on this the wounded man was placed and borne to Shoshone.

As Laidlaw had a cot in the office, Broncho Barton was placed on it, and a physician was summoned.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

UNEXPECTED PROOF.

It was beginning to matter little to Laidlaw whether he would be able or not to capture Lawrence Beeson in the midst of his road-agent gang, or at his criminal work of highway robbery. The proofs he had collected showing Beeson to be guilty of these crimes were of the strongest possible character. They were such as no jury could disbelieve; and their produc-

tion in a court of justice, on Beeson's arrest, must inevitably be to consign that individual to a long term of imprisonment.

Teamster Tom knew that Beeson was in close financial straits. He had not watched and shadowed Beeson so long without knowing all about him and his circumstances. Beeson was one of the most notorious gamblers in Shoshone. He was also a reckless speculator; and his gambling and speculations, with the expenses of other excesses, was rapidly bringing him to the verge of ruin.

His mines and his real estate holdings were very valuable, but they were mortgaged in many instances far beyond their actual worth.

Teamster Tom had his drag-net ready, and was purposing to "rake in" Beeson and a number of the latter's associates without further delay; and had been preparing for this and thinking of it, when interrupted that night by Marbury.

The physician summoned to examine the wound of Broncho Barton stated that it was not of a serious character, and that Barton would soon come out of his comatose condition, and would then mend rapidly. The shock had produced a concussion of the brain which was the cause of the present trouble.

Teamster Tom was thoroughly worn out; and not caring to take the trouble to seek his room in another part of the town, made a pillow of some clothing, and lay down on the office carpet to catch a few winks of sleep.

It was daylight, when he was aroused by the voice of Broncho Barton. Looking up, he saw that Barton had arisen and dressed himself, and was sitting on the edge of the cot jabbering unintelligibly, and staring at a written paper.

The maniac had not put on his hat, and his rolling eyes and the white bandages about his head conferred on him an unearthly appearance.

Teamster Tom was much astonished on seeing him thus, and immediately spoke to him, in the hope of quieting him.

"You'd better go back to bed, Broncho! You're in no condition to sit up and talk. You'll make yourself worse. How does your head feel?"

Instead of replying to this question, Barton stared wildly at him; and then broke into a furious tirade against Lawrence Beeson.

"Didn't you see him? He was hyer in the room a little while ago! And he tried to steal this out of my pocket! But I was too quick for him! I jumped up, and he dove out through the window."

The window was closed and had been all night, as Teamster Tom could readily see.

"I guess you were only dreaming, Broncho. He couldn't have gone out of that window, as you say, without my hearing him. I'm generally a pretty light sleeper."

He saw that Broncho was likely to become troublesome, and he got up and began to dress himself.

"He went right through the glass!" Barton declared. "An' he come in that way, too. I saw him standin' right there; and he would have killed me if I hadn't jumped up. He had a knife. My knife. The one I lost last night."

The madman seemed to be in a thoroughly wild mood; and, as soon as Teamster Tom had dressed, he opened the door, hoping to see some one coming who might aid him in controlling the lunatic, should force become necessary.

He was not prepared for what followed.

With an inarticulate cry, Barton dashed past him, leaped from the doorway into the street, darted quickly into an alley, and headed with all haste for the hills.

Teamster Tom would have followed, had he not seen that pursuit was utterly useless. The maniac sped over the ground with the lightness and ease of a deer. In a very few minutes he had gained the wooded slopes beyond the town, and was bounding up them with almost inconceivable agility.

The hour was very early, being only yet in the gray dawn of the morning, and no one was astir in the town. Laidlaw might have rushed out into the streets and organized a pursuing party; a thing he seemed at first tempted to do. But he turned back into the office, determined to wait the coming of Marbury.

As he crossed the threshold, his eyes fell on the writing at which Barton had been staring; and with some curiosity he picked it up.

The first sentence attracted his attention, and he read on, strangely affected and interested.

The paper bore evidence of having been written a good while. It was closely folded, and had been carried by Barton so long that on some of the folds it had worn through. It was dirt-stained and untidy in appearance. But Teamster Tom paid no attention to these things. The words which the paper contained were what held him as if spell-bound.

The writing was in effect a confession, somewhat loosely and wordily constructed, and in semi-diary form. It had been prepared, as the date showed, and as the writing itself evidenced, while Broncho Barton was still employed as a stage-driver, and before his reason had gone from him.

Laidlaw's face twitched and his eyes glistened strangely, as he read the confession.

In substance it stated that Barton was a member of the band to which Lawrence Beeson belonged, and that by being a stage-driver he was able to render them material aid in the robbing of the stages. He always halted the stage when commanded to, and so gave them no trouble on that score; and in addition sent them word when valuables were likely to be carried.

But the part most interesting to Teamster Tom was that referring to the murder of Jim Ross.

Barton had discovered that Ross was possessed of some money and nuggets; and having communicated the information to Beeson, the two were constantly watching for a good opportunity to rob him. While engaged in this, Barton chanced to learn of the promising mine indications which Ross had stumbled on near the base of Shoshone Mountain.

He communicated this also to Lawrence Beeson, and because of it, Beeson became more pertinacious in his shadowings of the prospector.

They watched Ross visit the vicinity of his new mine, on two or three occasions; and believing they knew the nature of his discoveries, and with the intention of profiting by them, Beeson and Barton, with two others, attacked and killed Ross one day, near the stage trail; and, after robbing him of his nuggets, left him lying there dead. They would have concealed his body, but that they thought they heard an approaching stage and were scared away.

After this Beeson and his friends took immediate possession of Ross's mines, as they supposed. The reader knows, however, that they did not find the mine located by Jim Ross; but that this was rediscovered by and came into the possession of Teamster Tom.

The mines seemed to be so rich and promising that the boom camp of Shoshone was immediately started, whose history has been in a measure traced in this story.

Barton returned to his stage-driving, although he had a liberal share in the Shoshone mines, a fact not known to the public.

The conclusion of the confession—for, having been written in diary form, it was lengthy and covered several weeks of time—was filled with odd mental vagaries, plainly indicating the state toward which Barton was tending. The shadow of insanity was even then hovering over him.

Teamster Tom sat down in deep reflection, holding the confession in his hand, and occasionally looking at it.

It made plain many things that had been difficult of understanding.

Its close was filled with expressions of fear, showing that the crime which Broncho Barton had assisted in committing was the real cause of his insanity.

He was afraid of road-agents; afraid they would kill him as Jim Ross had been killed!—and it will be remembered that when he leaped from the stage and abandoned it, as described in an early chapter, he had thought himself then pursued and threatened by road-agents.

It was an odd and revengeful freak that should make him believe he was himself the murdered man, always in danger of being re-killed by Beeson and his allies.

It was clear, now, to Teamster Tom, that, in the division of the nuggets, the oddly-marked one had fallen to Beeson, and had by him been paid over in the settlement with his teamster. This nugget, so paid, had been the first thing to awaken Laidlaw's suspicions.

He could understand, now, too, why Beeson had been so anxious to have the maniac killed, or captured and shut up. This had been because Beeson feared that in his babblings and ravings he might reveal the truth, if permitted to haunt the towns of that section.

"This may not be good evidence in a court of justice!" Teamster Tom commented, re-studying the confession. "It makes everything clear, though, to me, and I shall use it for all it's worth. It's a strange fate that brings it into my hands. It makes me believe there is no such thing as an effectual concealment of crime. Lawrence Beeson thinks the murder of Jim Ross has been forgotten, but he shall see!"

CHAPTER XXXVII.

A VILLAIN'S CRAFT.

FAWNIE LAWRENCE was deeply grieved and shocked when she read Beeson's heartless letter. Reading between the lines, she could see a plain desire to cast her off; and this brought a conflict of emotions, the principal of which was anger.

She was improving rapidly, now, and had been told she would soon be able to leave the hospital. Hence, she had waited in great anxiety for the coming of this letter.

"He doesn't want me to come back!" she thought, with some indignation.

This was extremely puzzling, as one of her last memories of him was connected with the proposal of marriage made on the way to the shack.

"If he doesn't want me to come back, I'm sure I'll not go!" with a little show of spiteful energy. "I can't see what makes him feel

that way. I don't know what I have done, or left undone, to cause it. Surely, it isn't because I wouldn't listen to his foolish talk!"

That seemed the only plausible reason; and, after much thought, she decided it must be the right one.

The letter was couched in harsh words and filled with professions of disbelief of her story; but she felt that it breathed a strong desire for her to remain away.

"I may be wrong in that," she commented, after a time. "Maybe he really does think I am an impostor. Perhaps Faggett has written to him and put that into his mind."

If this were true, then it occurred to her that it might be her duty to return to Shoshone to convince this obdurate man that she was what she claimed to be.

She had some things of value in Shoshone, besides a number of friends there. She remembered Teamster Tom with a pang. She was sure he would never have written such a letter in reply to her tearful appeal for aid. This letter of Beeson's was heartless; and whatever Teamster Tom might be to others he had been uniformly kind to her.

She was no longer able to conceal from herself the knowledge that, in spite of her utmost endeavors, the boomer detective of Shoshone had stolen her heart—and he had held it, notwithstanding her belief that he was a road-agent. This knowledge brought a frequent shame and pain, but their pangs were not sufficient to enable her to cast out this love. Still, she believed she had been able to hide it from the world—from all the world except Lawrence Beeson—and she would continue to so hide it.

After re-perusing the letter, she lay back on her pillow, wearily, and thought until her head ached. And the more she thought, the more she was determined to return to Shoshone.

She could return and she could convince her friends that she was not an impostor. Ah! she could even convince Lawrence Beeson of that fact. And then she could go away again, feeling she had done her duty in that respect.

But how was she to get there? Beeson had sent her no money, and she had not a cent. She was still ill; and it would be a long time before she could earn enough at anything to get together funds for that long journey.

Then she recollected that there was in Chicago a lady whom she had once met in Deadwood!—a wealthy lady, who had been there on a touring trip, and whose acquaintance it was a pleasure to remember. That lady might aid her, and she resolved to seek her out as soon as she was equal to the task.

As a preliminary to this she had the nurse bring a Directory and look up for her the address.

Her heart sunk with the sudden fear that this lady might also treat her as an impostor. That was what Faggett had done, and what Beeson had done; and another such rebuff she felt she could not stand.

Her great anxiety to call on this woman and petition her for assistance gave her increased strength and appeared to hasten her recovery; and as soon as she was strong enough to walk out at all, she took a street car for the portion of the city where the lady resided.

She was trembling with nervousness, exhaustion and inward fear, as she got out of the car at the crossing, and made her way feebly toward the handsome residence bearing the number given by the Directory. She felt so like an out-cast seeking alms. So like a friendless wanderer to whom all doors were shut; that she almost feared to approach the gate and make her way to the building.

The grounds were wide and shaded, and in spite of her depression she could not but admire their beauty.

Mounting the steps, she rung the bell; and, when a servant appeared, timidly presented the card she had prepared before leaving the hospital.

The serving girl glanced at the card, eyed the shabby figure suspiciously, then closed the door and hastened away.

She was back in a very short time, however, her manner wholly altered, and led the way into a comfortable parlor.

Fawnie shrunk from the ordeal of meeting with the grand lady whom she had met in Deadwood, and her heart hammered a pit-a-pat when she heard advancing footsteps on a carpeted floor adjoining.

The lady—whose name was Mrs. Momsen—opened the door expectantly and with her face wreathed in smiles. But she started back in shocked surprise, when her eyes fell on the pale face and shrinking figure before her.

"You do not know me?" Fawnie tremblingly ventured, rising to greet her. "I know I am very much changed; but surely you will remember me!"

The words were an appeal, almost touching and pathetic. If this woman denied her and denounced her as a fraud, to whom could she go?

There was little wonder that she trembled and quailed before this uncertainty.

"You are not Fawnie Lawrence?"

"Indeed, Mrs. Momsen, I am Fawnie Lawrence, whom you met in Deadwood! You must

believe me, for I so need a friend! I have been very sick—and—and I am much changed—and—and—"

"You poor dear thing!" and Mrs. Momsen flew at her, folded her in a motherly embrace, and kissed her pale cheeks. "What can have happened to you? You must have suffered terribly to have changed you so? I should never have recognized you—never!"

Fawnie's overflowing heart could not endure this. Her fears had so wrought on her feelings, that, when the reaction came, she could do nothing but sob.

"You must tell me all about it!" Mrs. Momsen adjured, drawing her to a seat on the sofa. "You must tell me all about it—everything!"

It was some time before Fawnie Lawrence could speak connectedly; and then, nestling at Mrs. Momsen's side, she rehearsed her strange story in all its tragic and painful details—interrupted from time to time by Mrs. Momsen's wondering comments and exclamations.

"You poor dear! How you have suffered!" kissing her again, and smoothing back the thin hair. "You must stay right here with me for weeks. Do you hear? for weeks! I won't listen to anything else! I don't know that I ought to forgive you for staying in that miserable hospital as you did, without sending me word."

"They were very kind to me there!" Fawnie testified.

"Yes; I presume they were. But it seems to me dreadful! If I could have had you here, I know you would have got well sooner. But now that you are here, I shall keep you!"

"But indeed, Mrs. Momsen," protestingly, "I feel that I ought to go on to Shoshone without any unnecessary delay. I don't want them to think there that I am an impostor; and they will think that, until I go there and convince them to the contrary."

"Let them think!" with a disdainful sniff. "Who cares for the people of a little town like Shoshone? What difference will it make what they think? You can accomplish just as much by postponing your trip a month, as by going now. And as for this Mr. Beeson—"

Fawnie had spoken of Beeson's letter, and she now produced it and gave it to Mrs. Momsen to read.

"The wretch!" that kind lady ejaculated. "He doesn't want you to come back! And when I met him in Deadwood, I thought him such a nice gentleman!"

"I am afraid he doesn't," Fawnie admitted. "I think, though, he has been deceived by the Mr. Faggett I told you of; the one who visited me in the hospital."

"Another nice gentleman!" sarcastically. "I think you would do well to stay away from Shoshone altogether."

Fawnie, however, was not to be shaken in her resolution to return; and, after some further conversation, timidly made known the real object of her visit.

Mrs. Momsen was perfectly willing to advance her the necessary amount of money, though she would much prefer to dissuade her.

But Fawnie was obdurate in this; and it was finally arranged that Mrs. Momsen was to loan her—Fawnie would only accept it as a loan—the amount of money needed; and further, that Fawnie was to remain there with Mrs. Momsen until she had more fully regained her strength.

When all this had been harmoniously and satisfactorily provided for, Mrs. Momsen supplied her with some much-needed clothing, and made her as comfortable as possible; and then hastened away to the hospital to acquaint the people there with what had been done, and to make promises for the settlement of any charges against Fawnie.

Fawnie remained with Mrs. Momsen for nearly a week, recruiting rapidly in this genial atmosphere. They took drives almost every day, and sometimes of evenings they walked out.

Fawnie strolled out by herself one evening. She did not venture far from the house. But in that short walk, she had an experience that shook her considerably.

She noticed a bearded man closely eying her, who followed her as she slowly walked on. She passed around the Square to avoid him, but he interposed himself in her homeward way; and when she drew near him, there was a familiar something in his general appearance that suggested Smith Faggett.

She knew that Faggett was at liberty, having read of his escape; and she felt that this must be Faggett in disguise.

She had no desire to meet him, and would have avoided him if it had been possible. She had made one wide *detour* for that purpose, and saw that a similar ruse would result no better. She would be compelled to pass by him; perhaps to speak to him.

There were people passing continually, and she was determined to cry out to these, should she think it necessary.

Smith Faggett had haunted the vicinity of the hospital a good deal since the date of his escape, and as soon as he thought it safe to go on the street in disguise; and by so doing had become aware of Fawnie's change of abode.

His great fear was, that she would return to

Shoshone; and his purpose in approaching her now, was a desire to frighten or dissuade her from this.

"Hello!" he said, in a low and thickened voice, coming close up to her. "I reckon, now, you don't know me?"

"I think I do!" fearfully, and stepping back a pace.

"Oh, you do!"

"I think you are Smith Faggett!"

"I am glad you know me, for that will save unnecessary explanations. I've been wanting to see you for some time. Ever since our meeting in the hospital."

Fawnie could not say as much for him.

"Yes," Faggett continued oilily, keeping a sharp watch the while to make sure they were not observed, "I've been wanting to explain to you my actions at that time. Of course, I knew you were Fawnie Lawrence; but, for your sake, I pretended I didn't know you."

She held in abeyance her suffocating sense of indignation.

He paused as if expecting her to inject an interrogatory; but as she persisted in her silence, he continued:

"It would have ruined you in the eyes of your new friends there if I had confessed an acquaintance with you. I was surprised at your sending for me. You couldn't afford to be on speaking terms, you know, with a man in my condition—in irons, straight from a prison, and under a serious charge! And so I pretended not to know you, to save you."

"But you denied I was Fawnie Lawrence!" her indignation getting the better of her. "That placed me in the light of an impostor; a thing as bad, it seems to me, as having a speaking acquaintance with a criminal."

"You are too harsh," he protested. "Perhaps I was wrong in what I did, but my intentions were of the best. You ought to give me credit for that."

She did not desire to continue the conversation, and said as much.

"Where are you going?" he questioned.

"To the home of my friend, Mrs. Momsen!" indicating the house.

"But where are you going when you leave there? You do not intend to remain in Chicago?"

"I don't know that you have a right to question me on that point! But I will answer. I shall return to Shoshone."

"Egad!" and his anxiety was visible, even beneath his disguise. "That will stir up our mutual friend, Beeson."

"Why?" was her timid inquiry.

"I don't think he's dying to see you. I can testify from personal observation that he was deucedly glad when he thought you were dead. I suppose he thought it was good riddance."

She recoiled from this heartless thrust.

"The truth isn't always pleasant," and he laughed. "But, in my judgment, your excellent cousin isn't waiting with outstretched arms to receive you."

She could not feel that she ought to thank Faggett for this information, and was inexpressibly relieved when he hurriedly said he must go, and started up a side street at a brisk saunter.

Faggett had caught sight of a blue-coated patrolman, and thought it wise to move on.

As soon as free from his unpleasant company, Fawnie Lawrence hastened home, where she recounted her adventure to Mrs. Momsen.

That lady was very justly indignant at Faggett's performance, and doubly incensed at Beeson's heartlessness, and again endeavored to dissuade Fawnie from her purpose of returning to Shoshone.

But Fawnie Lawrence was a very determined young woman in some things, and declared her intention of continuing in the course she had marked out. Doubtless, a desire to see Teamster Tom had more to do in thus influencing her than anything else, though she would not have confessed it, and probably would not have believed it, had it been brought to her attention. Nevertheless, the boomer detective was almost constantly in her thoughts.

Two evenings later she accompanied her friend to the station, for the purpose of taking the Western train.

While waiting there she was sure she saw Faggett's skulking form moving in the shadows near her.

He approached her, finally, while Mrs. Momsen was temporarily absent from her side, and, made bold by an ill-defined fear that he meant harm to her, she spiritedly informed him that if he attempted any tricks, she would not hesitate to denounce him, and hand him over to the police, whom she knew to be even then seeking him.

At this he apologized and beat a hasty retreat, and she saw no more of him. But when she was sitting alone in the coach, with the train making its way slowly out of the great city, she could not divest herself of the feeling that he was also aboard.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

AN UNPROMISING PARTNERSHIP.

LAWRENCE BEESON got up to open the door in answer to a knock, and started in some sur-

prise when he saw before him the man whom he had believed to be hundreds of miles away. But he forced an immediate smile.

"My dear Faggett, how are you? Think of the devil, etc. Come in!"

Faggett walked into the room and sunk carelessly into a seat.

"You were thinking of me, eh? That's a compliment."

"Depending on what the thoughts were, of course," laughingly. "But really, I didn't expect to see you!"

"Oh, I didn't intend to stay in Chicago all the time. I gave the cops the slip, and here I am."

This scene took place at Beeson's residence, whither Smith Faggett had gone immediately on arriving at Shoshone by the night stage. He had not even been to see his wife, who was residing quite alone in the new home he had prepared for her.

"When did you get in?"

"Not over ten minutes ago. I came straight here, because I have a bit of news to communicate in which you will be interested. I didn't suppose you'd care to see me. I'm not quite such a fool as that, Beeson. But I knew you'd want to learn of this."

Beeson arched his brows as a surprised question.

"Fawnie Lawrence is in Deadwood!"

In spite of the command he had over his features, Beeson could not conceal his astonishment.

"Yes; she's in Deadwood."

"But I thought she was dead!" Beeson glibly lied. "And now you tell me she is alive and in Deadwood?"

"And on her way here," Faggett supplemented. "At least, she will be in a very short time. She stopped over there a day, I understand, with a friend."

Beeson twisted uneasily in his chair, at a loss for words.

"Then, you were mistaken in what you wrote me? That was really her you met in the hospital?"

"No, I'm not mistaken. I wasn't mistaken, then!" throwing all subterfuge to the winds. "There's no use in our trying to deceive each other, Beeson, any longer. I didn't want her to return here, and I was dead sure you didn't. So I pretended to her I didn't know her, told her she was an impostor, and all that, and wrote you to the same effect; but it didn't keep her away. She will be here in a few hours—probably in the morning."

"Well, what of it?" and Beeson looked slyly at him.

"Much or little, just as we choose it to be. With her alive, your chances of obtaining that fortune go glimmering. You see that Beeson?"

Beeson nodded an assent.

"And you see, too, that if she knows anything of this fortune—which she can't help knowing—"

"And all because of your lack of sense!" Beeson interjected.

"Well, I did rather put my foot in it there, when I published the whole thing to the world. Everybody knows, now, of the Myrtle Bostwick fortune, and of course she'll find it out. She can't help finding it out!"

"I don't know that I see what you're driving at, Faggett."

"Well, I'll come down to the point, then. Your house is her home, and of course she'll come right here. And, I don't want to flatter you, but you ought to have a good deal of influence over her. She'll be likely to do whatever you tell her to."

Beeson pleasantly admitted that such was very probably the case.

"If she stays here, she will find out about this, and will get the fortune. You'll never be able to put your hands on it, Beeson; for—and here I don't flatter you—you couldn't get her to marry you, if you'd try a thousand years. You know that as well as I do." This time Beeson did not nod an assent.

"Her presence here, and her efforts to get the fortune, may bother me, and keep me from succeeding; though, I must say to you, I think my wife's chances are extremely good."

"And though you do say so, your very words admit they are not!"

"We'll not higgie over phrases. I've a proposition to make, and I'll make it. I take it, there are no witnesses near to hear me; and if you shouldn't accept it, and it should seem to me necessary, I can very easily deny that I ever said anything of the kind to you."

"You are a villain, Faggett, and no mistake!" Faggett seemed to consider this a compliment.

"My proposition is that we unite our claims to this money. When Fawnie Lawrence comes, you are to get her out of the town again, immediately, by some hook or crook, and before she can find out anything about this Myrtle Bostwick business. That will remove her from the fight. Then, if you refuse to press your claim, there will be no one else to take the fortune but my wife."

"Which will let you have everything your own way."

"Of course, I don't expect you to trust me,

Beeson. You know me too well. Before you go into anything of the kind, I'll make you amply secure. That new house of mine is worth ten thousand dollars. The half of this fortune will not be over eight or nine thousand; for, when I came to look into it, I found it deucedly small; much smaller than any of us thought. I'll give you a trust deed on my property, which you are to release when I hand you over half the fortune. In that way, you take no risk, and can't lose anything."

"And if you shouldn't get the fortune?"

"If we go into the thing, I'm bound to get it. There will be absolutely no claimant but my wife."

"And if I refuse?"

"You can't afford to do that. You want money, and there'll be no money in that. If you press Fawnie's claim; you're likely to be defeated, anyway; and should the money be got, it wouldn't be yours."

"I might get the fingering of it, though."

"Well, think it over," feeling sure Beeson would consent to his plan.

"Now, I've something else to talk about. I'm dead sure I was shadowed all the way from Chicago to the end of the railway. I think, though, I threw the fellows off the scent at Buffalo Gap."

Beeson showed some signs of alarm.

"They'll not bother you. It's me they're after. All I want you to do is to keep still about my being in town. I rode down on the stage in disguise, and nobody recognized me. I'm going to stay in hiding until I'm sure the rascals have left the country. You'll help me in this?"

"I'll help you," Beeson promised. "And I'll think over that other matter, as you said. I begin to believe it will be the safest thing for me to do, especially if you secure me with that trust deed."

Faggett was anxious to go; and having said all he had come to say, he now took his departure.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

THE BEGINNING OF THE END.

FAGGETT went direct from Beeson's to his own home. He received, as he expected, a somewhat cold greeting from his wife; who, having learned of his arrest in Chicago, believed the chances of a fortune were at an end.

"I'm like a bad penny," he said, laughingly, "I always come back!"

"You might have stayed away this time, for all I cared," was the truthful declaration.

"You're getting along very pleasantly without me, eh?" looking around at the walls. "This is a nice den here; but I'm thinking you wouldn't have remained in it very long, if I hadn't returned, for I'd have sold it."

"Which you couldn't do without me!" somewhat triumphantly. "You couldn't dispose of it without my signature, and you know it! I'm your lawful wife, Smith Faggett, though I ain't very proud of the fact."

"See her dander rise!" mockingly addressing the walls. "It shows how she loves me. Such are the beauties of conjugal felicity!"

"And now that you're back, what are you going to do? You'll have to hide to keep from being arrested."

"I'm expecting to repose in strictest seclusion in the bosom of my family. It will give us a better opportunity to know each other. We're not half appreciative enough of each other's high qualities, all owing to that. I've been counting on it as a rare bit of enjoyment."

"Well, I haven't!" and she turned disdainfully away.

"You want to throw me over because you think the fortune's gone!" he said, looking fixedly at her. "That's the way with a woman. As long as her bread is buttered on both sides, and everything is just to her fancy, she's as kind as pie. I hesitate to draw the other picture!"

"But the fortune isn't gone, my dear. In fact, I think it's safer than ever."

He noticed her wondering glance, and proceeded hastily to explain the result of his conversation with Beeson.

She began to relent at once, and something like kindness came into her tones.

While thus engaged, Faggett fancied he heard a light step near one of the windows; and, getting up with a startled look on his face, crossed to that side of the room.

"The jig's up!" he said, or rather whispered, returning to her, apparently as carelessly and as coolly as if his whole being were not shaken by his fears.

But his ashen pallor did not escape her attention.

"Don't move or look round?" he cautioned. "Be just as calm as you can! The officers have followed me, and are surrounding the house. I've got to cut out of this! I thought I gave them the slip at Buffalo Gap, but I see I was mistaken. I am going to try to get out through the cellar by the back way. Don't act as if anything had happened, and don't pay any attention to me when I leave the room. Good-by."

Her lips were white, and they trembled as she faltered a reply.

The knowledge of this peril had come so suddenly that it terrified her.

With as easy a manner as possible, Faggett left the room; and as soon as he felt he was safe from the prying eyes of the men outside, he hastened to the cellar.

When he had gained the furthest wall, and was near the little door which opened from the cellar into the back-yard, he stopped; and, crouching in the darkness, strove to gain some inkling of what the officers were doing.

He could hear an occasional footstep, and once he heard whispering. He had a clear idea, nevertheless, of the situation. He knew the house was surrounded, and no doubt watched at all points, and he realized the extreme danger of his position.

Throughout the entire railway journey from Chicago, he had never felt safe, although so carefully disguised. But he had really believed he had eluded the officers at Buffalo Gap. The knowledge that he had not, was a rude awakening.

He saw, now, how foolish he had been in coming to Shoshone. Of all places in the world, that was the last he should have visited.

But it was too late for regrets.

"If I can only get out of this scrape, Shoshone won't see me again very soon," he thought, as he listened to the whispers without.

He feared to make an immediate dash. So he continued to crouch there. At length he heard a knock at the front door of the residence, and knew by that the officers had grown tired of waiting for him to appear. He started as if the hammering-raps were smiting his own heart.

Then, when no response came—for Mrs. Faggett had fled fearfully to her apartment—he heard the officers force an entrance and go tramping about the rooms.

This was his opportunity; the best, at least, he might expect. It was now, or never.

He cautiously lifted the door opening from the cellar into the rear yard.

He had no sooner done this, however, and stepped out, than he saw the form of a man near him, caught the gleam of an uplifted pistol, and heard the sharp command:

"Halt!"

Faggett had no intention of doing anything of the kind. To have halted, then, and surrendered without trying to escape, would have been matter for lifelong regret.

He had a club in his hand, which he had picked up in the cellar; and hurling this with all force at the guard's head, he leaped away into the gloom.

"Crack!" went the guard's revolver, spouting fire almost on the instant.

The man had deftly evaded the club and fired at Faggett.

But the bullet flew harmlessly, and Faggett sped on, feeling his hopes rising. It seemed to him the worst was already over. If he could but reach the street, he was hopeful of gaining the mountain slopes, where he would be comparatively safe.

There was more than one guard, however, as he soon discovered. There were several in the yard; and when he ran toward the rear gate, he saw two standing there.

He turned about to race back, only to find himself encompassed in an ever-narrowing circle of armed men.

Like the hunted hare, he would not give up, desperate as his situation seemed. With the way to the gate blocked, and retreat cut off, he made a dash for the low picket fence.

By this time, however, the entire force was gathering, called together by that pistol-shot; and they now bore down on Faggett from all sides.

Seeing he could not escape by running, in his desperation, he backed into some shrubbery, and there drew his revolver, determined to defend himself to the last.

But he was not given any chance to use it, for a policeman's club deftly wielded, smote him on the head and speedily reduced him to subjection.

Mrs. Smith Faggett had heard these ominous sounds in dismay. She felt sure Faggett would be captured, and a deep feeling that her own peril was imminent weighed her down. She had done many things to make her fearful of the grasp of the law, not the least of which was the perjury committed at Teamster Tom's trial. She had never rested easy, since that had been so clearly shown against her, and she felt she could not know at what moment she might be arrested for it.

The very fact that she was Smith Faggett's wife seemed to her to render her insecure. And when she listened to the pistol-shots and the sounds of the chase, she became more than ever impressed with the danger of her situation.

She heard the ringing shout announcing Faggett's capture; and then, white and trembling, she clutched a purse of money lying conveniently near, crept down to the front door, and slipped out and away in the darkness.

That was the last ever seen of her in Shoshone; and it cannot be said that her disappearance was a source of grief to the people of that town.

CHAPTER XL.

JUSTICE STRIKES A BLOW.

In the early hours of the morning, Teamster Tom and these same officers advanced on the residence of Lawrence Beeson for the purpose of placing that gentleman under arrest.

This was a movement Teamster Tom had contemplated for that morning, and which he would have carried out without the aid of these officers, if they had not been there, ready and willing to assist him.

A warrant had been issued for Beeson during the night, and placed in the hands of the sheriff of the newly organized county; and it was the sheriff who led and had charge of the force.

It was feared Beeson would make a fight. Hence, the large body of men gathered to effect his capture. This belief had been fostered by certain statements made by Faggett, for Faggett, hoping to screen himself, had charged many of his misdeeds on Beeson and represented him as a bad, and altogether dangerous man.

The officers were disappointed, on reaching Beeson's residence, to find the bird flown. There was plenty of evidence, though, to show that he had only been gone a short time. His bed was in a tumbled condition, and appeared to have only been just vacated. In addition to this, the housekeeper stated she had heard him pass down the stairway, not five minutes before the arrival of the sheriff's party; and she further said she believed he had gone down in answer to a call.

All this proved that Beeson could not be far away. With the scent thus hot, the officers began a search for him in every place likely to afford him shelter; and just as day was dawning, they routed him from a lumber pile at the end of an alley.

He saw his place of concealment was likely to be discovered; and as they came on in that direction, he leaped out and ran for the timbered slopes.

The warning brought him by a friend had not come a moment too soon. Had it been delayed but a few minutes, he would have been entrapped in his own house.

Beeson did not desire to leave the town, and was making his way to the residence of a man who he knew would secrete him, when forced to take refuge in the lumber pile.

Now, however, he was compelled to throw aside all concealment and make a run for his liberty.

Beeson, bold and arrogant as he had always been, was like many another coward who sees disaster approaching. All his courage suddenly failed him; and instead of remaining and making a bold fight in the courts, his only thought was of escape. Doubtless, it is a sense of guilt which produces this sudden weakness.

The officers immediately gave chase, firing their revolvers as they ran. The people of that portion of Shoshone swarmed out of their houses, aroused by the firing and confusion; and witnessed what they never expected to witness: the great Mr. Beeson flying like a confessed criminal before the agents of the law.

It was a revelation that was exciting and startling. And when to it was added the knowledge that Smith Faggett had returned, and was under arrest, they had a combination of sensations sufficient to furnish food for a whole day's gossip.

Some of them, from a mere love of such things, joined in the pursuit, which was pushed briskly.

But Lawrence Beeson seemed destined to escape. He gained the rocky defiles and timbered gullies, and mounting by devious paths, which were unknown to the pursuers, quickly disappeared.

He was not to escape, however, even though that seemed to be his destiny. There was a human bloodhound on his track, who could not be baffled by any turnings and twistings, and who clung as pertinaciously to the trail as if he were really gifted with the bloodhound's instinct.

This was Broncho Barton, the maniac stage-driver.

Barton had been in hiding in these hills, ever since the night of his flight from the office of Teamster Tom. At the moment Beeson broke cover and rushed for the slopes, Barton was watching the town with his restless, eager eyes. He saw the fleeing man and his pursuers, and became an intensely interested spectator.

When Beeson was near enough to be recognized, and Barton saw he was likely to evade those in chase, it occurred to him to take a hand in the matter.

He was some distance to the left of the line taken by Beeson, and Beeson had disappeared before Barton reached the trail. But to the maniac this was a matter of slight consequence.

He had been longing for a chance to avenge himself on Beeson for the crime which he believed Beeson to have committed against him. Here the opportunity was presented.

Barton paid no heed to the officers who were swarming up the slopes; and as these did not see him, his part in the drama was for a time unknown.

The officers did not relinquish their search, but steadily continued it.

This fact was patent to Lawrence Beeson,

who, looking down from an elevation, could see them darting in and out among the trees far below him.

"Catch me now, if you can!" he gritted, shaking his clinched fist at them. "You might as well go back to Shoshone and crawl into your holes, for all the good you'll do. There can't anybody catch me, now!"

He might not have been so boastful if he could have seen the stealthy form that was at that moment writhing along his track, but concealed from his sight by a depression in the hills.

Having delivered himself of this, Beeson plunged further into the hills, shaping his course after a time in the direction of Deadwood.

He did not travel so rapidly, now; and because of this, he was soon made aware that the mad stage-driver was on his track.

Turning to look back, he caught a glimpse of Barton's skulking form. He was at first puzzled and startled, for he could not conceive of how one of the officers came to be there. But Barton came into full view in a little while.

"It's that crazy stage-driver!" he ejaculated, fiercely. "That he should be following me, now, of all times! I ought to have killed him long ago, and so been rid of him!"

The fire of wrath was in his eyes, and as he gave utterance to his thoughts, he felt nervously in his pocket for his revolver.

It was a weapon of small caliber, preferred by him because of its light weight, and which he always carried. It was not of much service, except at short range.

Barton had disappeared; but Beeson soon saw him again, coming on in that swift, tireless and relentless way.

"He'll hang at my heels all day, if I don't stop him!" and his brow grew darker. "He's made a perfect bother and nuisance of himself, anyway! A dozen times he's hounded me this way, and I don't think I ought to stand it any longer!"

He saw that within ten minutes, Barton would reach the point whereon he was now standing.

"I'll stop him!" with a fierce oath. "I'll not have him hounding me any further! He'll lead those officers on, till I am captured!"

This time he drew out the revolver; and, crouching behind a convenient bowlder, carefully cocked it and awaited the maniac's approach.

Barton, when he came in view, was moving with much agility over the ground, his eyes fixed constantly on the "sign" which he was reading.

There seemed little enough to guide any one. A bent twig here, or a turned stone there, with occasionally a bit of fresh earth or a dislodged bowlder. These were the marks left by Beeson's flying feet.

The opportunity for a murderous shot could not have been better, as the maniac came on with bent head and faculties centered on his work.

The fiendishness of a bitter hate glared out at him from Beeson's watchful eyes.

He came nearer and nearer, sometimes walking slowly, and at others jogging along in a little trot.

Suddenly a shot rung out from Beeson's revolver, and Broncho Barton threw up his hands and staggered. He was very near at the time, and it was evident he was hard hit; but he recovered himself quickly.

Giving a fierce yell as his eyes fell on Beeson, he drew a long-bladed knife and dashed recklessly up the slope.

To all appearances, such a thing as fear was to him unknown. He only saw before him his enemy; whom he desired to slay, even as he fancied he had been slain by him.

Beeson fired again; twice, thrice; and uplifted the revolver for another shot—the last the weapon contained.

It was plain Barton had been hit more than once, for at one of the shots he had almost pitched forward on his face.

"He's worse than any grizzly!" Beeson snarled, as he sent the last bullet on its murderous mission.

Barton was scarcely more than an arm's length away, and the small, but deadly missile struck him full in the chest. Had it been a larger ball, it would have dropped him instantly. As it was, although the wound was fatal, yet the shock was not sufficient to stop the maniac's onward rush.

He gave another ear-splitting scream, and lunged at Beeson with the big knife. Beeson endeavored to ward it off with the empty revolver. The blow was diverted from the heart, at which it was aimed, but the keen-pointed blade caught Beeson's right thigh and went to the bone, inflicting a ghastly and terrible wound.

Broncho Barton fell forward, even as he dealt the blow, and with a gasp and a quiver sunk lifeless at the side of the man whose life he had sought.

Beeson was deathly pale from his exertions and his wound. The blade had barely missed an

important artery, and blood was gushing from the gaping cut in a terrifying way, saturating all of his lower garments.

He saw that Broncho was dead, or apparently so; but gave him not a second glance. His own condition was too critical.

"My God! I shall bleed to death!" he exclaimed, in quick fright.

With this he tore out the lining of his coat and improvised a hasty bandage, stopping the bleeding to a considerable extent by the pressure of his fingers.

He succeeded after a time in checking the flow, and in almost stopping it; but his condition was scarcely less serious. He could not go on. He feared to move lest he should start the flow afresh. And so he was compelled to lie there by the side of the body of the maniac stage-driver, a prey to the most terrible suspense.

Soon he started up. Below him he heard the sounds of men's voices.

He knew what that meant. The officers had succeeded in finding his trail, and were coming on in pursuit. And he was powerless to move from his position! It was a terrible and fearful retribution; a kind of irony of fate.

He and Broncho Barton, with others, had murdered Jim Ross; the commission of which deed had brought on the stage-driver's madness. Now, Broncho Barton had met his death at Beeson's hand, and Beeson had received from Barton a wound which promised to deliver him up to justice.

"This is awful!" Beeson moaned, his eyes almost starting from their sockets, and the deepest fear manifest in his every look and attitude. "Must I lie here like a trapped bear and let those fellows capture me?"

He could do nothing to prevent their approach, and to continue his flight was utterly impossible. He could not even defend himself, except with the knife, for he had fired his last cartridge into Barton's breast.

In the few minutes in which he lay there, awaiting the coming of the officers, whose approach he could constantly hear, he suffered untold tortures both of body and mind. His wound was painful, but its pain was as nothing compared with his mental agony.

When the officers beheld him and ran forward, he drew himself up like a stricken eagle, and with the knife in his hand, shouted a warning and a defiance.

But his words were unheeded, and in spite of the savage blows which he aimlessly struck, he was overpowered and made a prisoner.

CHAPTER XLI.

THE CLOUDS ROLL BY.

THESE various occurrences were the sole topic of conversation in the town of Shoshone, when the Deadwood stage rolled in that morning.

Fawnie Lawrence was one of its passengers, but she had no need to come to Shoshone to learn of these startling events. They were of sufficient importance to justify extra editions of the Shoshone dailies (which were now published in the morning instead of in the afternoon), and these dailies, with their sensational reports, were in the hands of all the stage passengers. They had been obtained from the driver of the up-going stage, who sought to turn an extra penny by their sale.

That she was surprised, startled and bewildered need scarcely be said. The accounts seemed like the relations of a hideous dream. But the conversation of the passengers convinced her that it was all too true. Lawrence Beeson had fallen from his high estate! He was known to be a criminal of the most audacious type; a thief, a highway robber and a murderer. It was even known that he had instigated the scheme aimed against the honor and liberty of Teamster Tom.

Faggett had made full confession of everything, cowardly hoping to screen himself in this way from well-merited punishment; and Lawrence Beeson, grown desperate, had not deigned to deny the charge.

Fawnie had a deep feeling of pity for him, which was increased by the information that he lay near death's door from the wound received at the hands of the mad stage-driver. She could pity him, even though she could not sympathize with him; and the memory of his acts of injustice toward herself were swallowed up by recollections of his many kindnesses.

There was one statement which gave her a thrill of pleasure and delight. Teamster Tom had been maligned, and she need no longer believe him what her fancy had painted. She could regard him now as an honorable and upright man!

Her first act on getting out of the stage was to hasten to the jail where Beeson was reported to be incarcerated.

She had so changed in appearance since the people of Shoshone had last seen her, that she was easily able to screen her identity by the aid of her drawn veil.

She found Beeson on a cot in the prison, attended by a physician. He was pale and nervous, and the lines in his face testified to his

anxiety. There was also a desperate, hunted look there which she had never thought to see.

He knew her when she was ushered into his presence, and the veil was pushed aside.

"Why do you come here?" he snarled. "I thought I might be able to aid you," retreating timidly before this outburst.

"Well, you can't, then! And you might as well pack yourself off. I don't want to see you!"

He was venomous with baffled ambition and rage.

"I hoped you could tell me that it isn't true," she faltered, "that—"

"You see I am a prisoner here!" sharply. "What more do you want? I don't want to see you, I tell you! I don't want to see anybody! Go back to Chicago! Go back to the hospital! Go anywhere!—just so you leave me alone!"

She retreated before his impetuous, angry words; and seeing that nothing was to be gained by further attempts at an interview, she departed from the prison.

She could no longer doubt that the letter he had sent her had been written solely for the purpose of preventing her return to Shoshone.

"I am so glad to be able to reassure you of my innocence, and to know the proofs of it are so strong you cannot longer doubt!"

Teamster Tom's eyes shone with honest pride, as he uttered these words, addressed to Fawnie Lawrence.

The two had met by seeming accident in Mrs. Partridge's restaurant. It had been an "accident," so far as Fawnie Lawrence was concerned, but of Teamster Tom that could not truthfully be said. Burning with a desire to see Fawnie, he had carefully planned for the meeting.

A tell-tale blush, commingled with a look of pleasure, mounted to her face, when she beheld him; and this he interpreted favorably. She would have retreated precipitately; but he would allow nothing of the kind, insisting that he wanted to clear himself in her eyes; and so he had drawn her into one of the small apartments used as eating-rooms.

"I don't blame you for your very natural mistake," he continued. "The circumstantial evidence was all against me. But I don't care to think of that, now. It is all blotted out by the knowledge that you are alive and well!"

His lips quivered perceptibly.

Her eyes were shining and eloquent, though she did not reply in words.

"You can never know how I suffered, when I thought you had perished in that awful manner! You never can know! For—"

He hesitated to speak the words that were on his tongue; and she, knowing by a woman's intuition what he feared to say, shrunk tremblingly.

There was a big lump in his throat, which he swallowed with a great effort.

"For I loved you, Fawnie! I never believed I would dare to repeat this. But I can't avoid it. I must tell you again how I have loved you, and how much I love you, now. You will permit me to, will you not? now that you know I am innocent?"

She did not look up, feeling powerless to lift her eyes from the floor. But he knew she would not refuse to listen to him this time; and, made bolder by her silence, he moved closer to her and gently kissed her hair.

"You will tell me that I have not been wrong in this? That I am not mistaken in thinking you love me, even as I love you?"

He kissed her again, and drew her to him.

"You do love me?" questioningly.

And when the faint affirmative response came, there was no happier man on earth than Tom Laidlaw.

They sat there conversing a long time; and when they returned to the main room, where Jed Marbury was talking to Mrs. Partridge, the happiness visible on their faces told its own story.

"I reckon, now,"—and Jed advanced with extended hands, looking questionably from one to the other, "that congratulations is in order. Mrs. Marbury, that-is-to-be, j'ines with me in good wishes! What do you say? Let's make it a double weddin'!"

CHAPTER XLII.

THE SWEEPSTAKE WON.

A DOUBLE wedding it was, too; though a quiet affair, in accordance with the wishes of Fawnie. This was its only disappointing feature to Jed Marbury. He wanted a "hooraw" of a time, as he expressed it; with crowds and crowds of people, flowers galore, a minister from Deadwood, a supper such as had never been seen in Shoshone, and all else after the same fashion. For Marbury was proud of his bride; as proud, even, as Teamster Tom was of his.

This great and interesting event—great and interesting for the parties most concerned—did not take place until a full month after the occurrences above narrated. The interval Fawnie

passed with Mrs. Partridge, as that good lady's especial and privileged guest.

It was a month filled to the brim with affairs of an exciting nature; and in his whole life, Teamster Tom was never so busy.

The trial of Beeson and Faggett occurred during that period; for the offenses committed by Faggett in the Black Hills were of so much more heinous a character than those committed against the laws of Illinois, that he was tried in Shoshone, instead of being taken to Chicago. If he had come clear, the Chicago authorities would have asked for him; but there was no chance for that, after his confession.

He had made a clean breast of everything, thereby implicating all his criminal associates, in the hope that he would be rewarded with his liberty. But when he found this was not to be the case, he made a retraction, and claimed that he had made his statements through fear, and that they were not true.

This did not help him however. The evidence which had been slowly and laboriously collected by the boomer detective was so strong that nothing could withstand it; and the jury, after having carefully weighed and sifted it, unanimously returned verdicts of "guilty" against all the parties charged, and this without leaving their seats in the court-room. Only a certain leaning toward mercy kept the sentence from being death, for many men had lost their lives by the stage robberies. As it was, they and all their associates were given long prison sentences—a just recompense for their crimes!

Beeson's financial affairs were found to be so bad and shaky, that when his debts were paid, nothing remained of all the vast wealth he was popularly supposed to possess. Faggett's ten-thousand-dollar house was swept into the same maelstrom; for he had been equally reckless in his gambling and speculations.

The mine in which Beeson had so prided himself passed, through a sale, into the hands of Teamster Tom, as did also much of Beeson's Shoshone property.

The great race for the Shoshone sweepstake had been run neck-and-neck by these men, with Teamster Tom the victorious winner. What Laidlaw prized, however, more than the smiles of fortune, was the love and confidence of the lovable woman who had become his wife.

Mrs. Fawnie Laidlaw did not forget the Kennups in her new happiness. They had been kind to her, and to them she owed her life. The little farm in the foot-hills which they had chosen for their home was covered with many improvements, which found their way to the Kennups as gifts from her hands; and more than once in the years that have sped by since the time of this story, she and her husband have made the honest people happy by a pleasant call and a visit of more or less duration.

Jed Marbury had quit staging forever. There would have been cause for this in the coming of the new railway, perhaps; but that was not the real cause. He became the proprietor and exponent of the glories of the well-known Shoshone restaurant which has figured so largely in these pages.

There was no need that the Marburys should run a restaurant, and they only did it as a matter of choice. For Mrs. Marbury, by right of inheritance, came into possession of the Myrtle Bostwick fortune.

In a quiet way, aided by Marbury and Teamster Tom, she had worked for it, as being hers by right, almost ever since Smith Faggett's revelations in the dailies had made her acquainted with the fact that such a fortune existed.

Myrtle Bostwick, whose death had been attested to by Mrs. Smith Faggett, was a half-sister to Mrs. Jennie Partridge; and there being no nearer relative, the fortune naturally descended to the genial restaurant-keeper.

Fawnie Lawrence, before her adoption into the Lawrence family—which was the link binding her to Lawrence Beeson—had borne the name of Bostwick. Not Myrtle Bostwick, but Fawnie Bostwick.

The knowledge of this was what set Beeson to investigating the subject, and led him to put forth his claim; and this claim he had been able to back—caring little whether his proofs were true or false—by a considerable amount of circumstantial evidence which he had hired a Deadwood detective to rake together.

As for Fawnie herself, she knew nothing at all about the matter until some time after her final return to Shoshone.

The greatest event, aside from the weddings—and the greatest event of all to the general public!—was the completion of the railway from Buffalo Gap to Shoshone, whence it extended to Deadwood. It was a time for universal rejoicing, for the firing of cannon, and other demonstrations of delight. It linked Shoshone and the Black Hills region to the outer world with indissoluble bands of steel. It was made an occasion for great festivities; and the driving of the last spike was greeted with acclamations and huzzas.

It was a final triumph for Teamster Tom; who felt, as he witnessed it, that he had indeed won the Shoshone Sweepstake.

THE END.

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141 Equinox Tom, the Bully of Red Rock.
127 Sol Scott, the Masked Miner.
119 Alabama Joe; or, The Yazoo Man-Hunters.
105 Dan Brown of Denver; or, The Detective.
88 Big George; or, The Five Outlaw Brothers.
71 Captain Cool Blade; or, Mississippi Man Shark.
67 The Boy Jockey; or, Honesty vs. Crookedness.
64 Double-Sight, the Death Shot.
50 Jack Rabbit, the Prairie Sport.
47 Pacific Pete, the Prince of the Revolver.
45 Old Bull's-Eye, the Lightning Shot.
40 Long-Haired Pards; or, The Tartars of the Plains.
30 Gospel George; or, Fiery Fred, the Outlaw.
28 Three-Fingered Jack, the Road-Agent.

BY WILLIAM H. MANNING.

- 714 Gabe Gall, the Gambolier from Great Hump.
708 Spokane Saul, the Samaritan Suspect.
692 Dead-Shot Paul, the Deep-Range Explorer.
685 Strawberry Sam, the Man with the Birthmark.
646 Dark John, the Grim Guard.
638 Murdock, the Dread Detective.
623 Dangerous Dave, the Never-Beaten Detective.
611 Alkali Abe, the Game Chicken from Texas.
596 Rustler Rube; the Round-Up Detective.
585 Dan Dixon's Double.
575 Steady Hand, the Napoleon of Detectives.
563 Wyoming Zeke, the Hotspur of Honey-suckle.
551 Garry Kean, the Man with Backbone.
539 Old Doubledark, the Wily Detective.
531 Saddle-Chief Kit, the Prairie Centaur.
521 Paradise Sam, the Nor'-West Pilot.
513 Texas Tartar, the Man With Nine Lives.
506 Uncle Honest, the Peacemaker of Hornets' Nest.
498 Central Pacific Paul, the Mail Train Spy.
492 Border Bullet, the Prairie Sharpshooter.
486 Kansas Kitten, the Northwest Detective.
479 Gladiator Gabe, the Samson of Sassajack.
470 The Duke of Dakota.
463 Gold Gauntlet, the Gulch Gladiator.
455 Yank Yellowbird, the Tall Hustler of the Hills.
449 Bluff Burke, King of the Rockies.
442 Wild West Walt, the Mountain Veteran.
437 Deep Duke; or, The Man of Two Lives.
427 The Rivals of Montana Mill.
415 Hot Heart, the Detective Spy.
405 Old Baldy, the Brigadier of Buck Basin.
385 Will Dick Turpin, the Leadville Lion.
297 Colorado Rube, the Strong Arm of Hotspur.
279 The Gold Dragoon, or, California Bloodhound.

BY LIEUT. A. K. SIMS.

- 709 Lodestone Lem, the Champion of Chestnut Burr.
695 Singer Sam, the Pilgrim Detective.
688 The River Rustlers.
673 Stuttering Sam, the Whitest Sport of Santa Fe.
666 Old Adamant, the Man of Rock.
618 Kansas Karl, the Detective King.
552 Prince Primrose, the Flower of the Flock.
528 Huckleberry, the Foot-Hills Detective.

BY COL. PRENTISS INGRAHAM.

- 704 Invisible Ivan, the Wizard Detective.
685 The Red-skin Sea Rover.
679 Revello, the Pirate Cruiser; or, The Rival Rovers.
672 The Red Rapier; or, The Sea Rover's Bride.
662 The Jew Detective; or, The Beautiful Convict.
658 The Cowboy Clan; or, The Tigress of Texas.
653 The Lasso King's League. A companion story to "Buck Taylor, the Saddle King."
640 The Rover's Retribution.
635 The Ex Buccaneer; or, The Stigma of Sin.
630 The Sea Thief.
625 Red Wings; or, The Gold Seekers of the Bahamas.
615 The Three Buccaneers.
610 The Red Flag Rover; or, White Wings of the Deep.
605 The Shadow Silver Ship.
600 The Silver Ship; or, The Sea Scouts of '76.
593 The Sea Rebel; or, Red Rovers of the Revolution.
587 Conrad, the Sailor Spy; or, True Hearts of '76.
581 The Outlawed Skipper; or, The Gantlet Runner.
560 The Man from Mexico.
553 Mark Monte, the Mutineer; or, The Branded Brig.
546 The Doomed Whaler; or, The Life Wreck.
540 The Fleet Scourge; or, The Sea Wings of Salem.
530 The Savages of the Sea.
524 The Sea Chaser; or, The Pirate Noble.
516 Chatard, the Dead-Shot Duelist.
510 El Moro, the Corsair Commodore.
493 The Scouts of the Sea.
489 The Pirate Hunter; or, The Ocean Rivals.
482 Ocean Tramps; or, The Desperadoes of the Deep.
476 Bob Brent, the Buccaneer; or, The Red Sea Raider.
469 The Lieutenant Detective; or, The Fugitive Sailor.
457 The Sea Insurgent; or, The Conspirator Son.
446 Ocean Ogre, the Outcast Corsair.
435 The One-Armed Buccaneer.
430 The Fatal Frigate; or, Rivals in Love and War.
425 The Sea Sword; or, The Ocean Rivals.
418 The Sea Siren; or, The Fugitive Privateer.
399 The New Monte Cristo.
393 The Convict Captain.
388 The Giant Buccaneer; or, The Wrecker Witch.
377 Afloat and Ashore; or, The Corsair Conspirator.
373 Sailor of Fortune; or, The Barnegat Buccaneer.
369 The Coast Corsair; or, The Siren of the Sea.
364 The Sea Fugitive; or, The Queen of the Coast.
346 Ocean Guerrillas; or, Phantom Midshipman.
341 The Sea Desperado.
336 The Magic Ship; or, Sandy Hook Freebooters.
325 The Gentleman Pirate; or, The Casco Hermits.
318 The Indian Buccaneer; or, The Red Rovers.
307 The Phantom Pirate; or, The Water Wolves.
281 The Sea Owl; or, The Lady Captain of the Gulf.
259 Outlaw and Cross; or, The Ghouls of the Sea.
255 The Pirate Priest; or, The Gambler's Daughter.
246 Queen Helen, the Amazon of the Overland.
235 Red Lightning the Man of Chance.
231 The Kid Glove Miner; or, The Magic Doctor.
224 Black Beard, the Buccaneer.
220 The Specter Yacht; or, A Brother's Crime.
216 The Corsair Planter; or, Driven to Doom.
210 Buccaneer Bess, the Lioness of the Sea.
205 The Gambler Pirate; or, Lady of the Lagoon.
198 The Skeleton Schooner; or, The Skimmer.
184 The Ocean Vampire; or, The Castle Heiress.
181 The Scarlet Schooner; or, The Sea Nemesis.
177 Don Diablo, the Planter-Corsair.
172 Black Pirate; or, The Golden Fetters Mystery.
162 The Mad Mariner; or, Dishonored and Disowned.
155 The Corsair Queen; or, The Gypsies of the Sea.
147 Gold Spur, the Gentleman from Texas.
139 Fire Eye; or, The Bride of a Buccaneer.
134 Darkey Dan, the Colored Detective.
131 Buckskin Sam, the Texas Trailer.
128 The Chevalier Corsair; or, The Heritage.
121 The Sea Cadet; or, The Rover of the Rigoletts.
116 Black Plume; or, The Sorceress of Heli Gate.
109 Captain Kyd, the King of the Black Flag.
104 Montezuma, the Merciless.
103 Merle, the Mutineer; or, The Red Anchor Brand.
94 Freelance, the Buccaneer.
89 The Pirate Prince; or, The Queen of the Isle.
85 The Cretan Rover; or, Zuleikah the Beautiful.
2 The Dare Devil; or, The Winged Sea Witch.

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Numbers * are from the pen of Buffalo Bill.

- 710 Buffalo Bill Baffled.
697 Buffalo Bill's Buckskin Brotherhood.
691 Buffalo Bill's Blind Trail.
682 Buffalo Bill's Secret Service Trail.
667 Buffalo Bill's Swoop; or, The King of the Mines.
649 Buck Taylor, the Saddle King.
644 Buffalo Bill's Bonanza.
*639 The Gold King; or, Montebello, the Magnificent.
629 Daredevil Dick; or, Buffalo Bill's Daring Role.
*599 The Dead Shot Nine; or, My Pards of the Plains.
517 Buffalo Bill's First Trail.
*414 Red Renard, the Indian Detective.
*401 One-Armed Pard; or, Borderland Retribution.
*397 The Wizard Brothers; or, White Beaver's Trail.
*394 White Beaver, the Exile of the Platte.
362 Buffalo Bill's Grip; or, Oath Bound to Custer.
329 The League of Three; or, Buffalo Bill's Pledge.
*319 Wild Bill, the Whirlwind of the West.
*304 Texas Jack, the Prairie Rattler.
*243 The Pilgrim Sharp; or, The Soldier's Sweetheart.
189 Wild Bill's Gold Trail; or, The Desperate Dozen.
175 Wild Bill's Trump Card; or, The Indian Heiress.
168 Wild Bill, the Pistol Dead Shot.
158 The Doomed Dozen; or, Buffalo Bill, Chief of Scouts.
117 Buffalo Bill's Strange Pard.
92 Buffalo Bill, the Buckskin King.
*83 Gold Bullet Sport; or, Knights of the Overland.
*53 Death-Tracker, the Chief of Scouts.

BY MAJOR DANGERFIELD BURR.

- 448 Hark Kanton, the Traitor.
188 The Phantom Mazeppa; or, The Hyena.
156 Velvet Face, the Border Bravo.
142 Captain Crimson, the Man of the Iron Face.
117 Dashing Dandy; or, The Hotspur of the Hills.
92 Buffalo Bill, the Buckskin King.

BY ALBERT W. AIKEN.

- 708 Joe Phenix's Siren.
700 Joe Phenix's Unknown.
681 Joe Phenix's Specials.
674 Uncle Sun Up, the Born Detective.
670 The Lightweight Detective.
665 The Frisco Detective; or, The Golden Gate Find.
660 The Fresh in Montana.
652 Jackson Blake, the Bouncer Detective.
647 The Fresh of Frisco at Santa Fe.
637 Joe Phenix in Crazy Camp.
632 Joe Phenix's Master Search.
628 Joe Phenix's Combin.
620 Joe Phenix's Silent Six.
613 Keen Billy, the Sport.
607 Old Benzine, the "Hard Case" Detective.
601 Joe Phenix's Shadow.
594 Fire Face, the Silver King's Foe.
583 The Silver Sharp Detective.
577 Tom of California.
570 The Actress Detective; or, The Invisible Hand.
562 Lone Hand, the Shadow.
556 Fresh, the Sport-Chevalier.
537 Blake, the Mountain Lion.
529 The Fresh in New York.
520 The Lone Hand on the Caddo.
497 The Fresh in Texas.
490 The Lone Hand in Texas.
475 Chin Chin, the Chinese Detective.
465 The Actor Detective.
461 The Fresh on the Rio Grande.
440 The High Horse of the Pacific.
423 The Lone Hand; or, The Red River Recreants.
419 The Bat of the Battery; or, Joe Phenix, Detective.
408 Doc Grip, the Vendetta of Death.
391 Kate Scott, the Decoy Detective.
384 Injun Dick, Detective; or, Tracked to New York.
381 The Gypsy Gentleman; or, Nick Fox, Detective.
376 Black Beards; or, The Rio Grande High Horse.
370 The Dusky Detective; or, Pursued to the End.
363 Crowningshield, the Detective.
354 Red Richard; or, The Crimson Cross Brand.
349 Iron-Hearted Dick, the Gentleman Road-Agent.
320 The Gentle Spotter; or, The N. Y. Night Hawk.
252 The Wall Street Blood; or, The Telegraph Girl.
203 The Double Detective; or, The Midnight Mystery.
196 La Marmoset, the Detective Queen.
173 California John, the Pacific Thoroughbred.
161 The Wolves of New York; or, Joe Phenix's Hunt.
130 Captain Volcano; or, The Man of Red Revolvers.
112 Joe Phenix, Private Detective.
107 Richard Talbot, of Cinnabar.
101 The Man from New York.
97 Bronze Jack, the California Thoroughbred.
93 Captain Dick Talbot, King of the Road.
91 The Winning Oar; or, The Innkeeper's Daughter.
84 Hunted Down; or, The League of Three.
81 The Human Tiger; or, A Heart of Fire.
79 Joe Phenix, the Police Spy.
77 The Fresh of Frisco; or, The Heiress.
75 Gentleman George; or, Parlor Prison and Street.
72 The Phantom Hand; or, The 5th Avenue Heiress.
63 The Winged Whale; or, The Red Rupert of Gulf.
59 The Man from Texas; or, The Arkansas Outlaw.
56 The Indian Mazeppa; or, Madman of the Plains.
49 The Wolf Demon; or, The Kanawha Queen.
42 The California Detective; or, The Witches of N.Y.
41 Gold Dan; or, The White Savage of Salt Lake.
38 Velvet Hand; or, Injun Dick's Iron Grip.
36 Injun Dick; or, The Death-Shot of Shasta.
35 Kentuck, the Sport; or, Dick Talbot of the Mines.
34 Rocky Mountain Rob, the California Outlaw.
33 Overland Kit; or, The Idyl of White Pine.
31 The New York Sharp; or, The Flash of Lightning.
27 The Spotter Detective; or, Girls of New York.

BY J. C. COWDRICK.

- 626 Ducats Dion, the Nabob Sport Detective.
612 Sheriff Stillwood, the Regulator of Raspberry.
598 The Dominie Detective.
591 Duke Daniels, the Society Detective.
580 Shadowing a Shadow.
565 Prince Paul, the Postman Detective.
557 The Mountain Graybeards; or, Riddles' Riddle.
519 Old Riddles, the Rocky Ranger.
499 Twilight Charlie, the Road Sport.
472 Gilbert of Gotham, the Steel-arm Detective.
452 Rainbow Rob, the Tulip from Texas.
436 Kentucky Jean, the Sport from Yellow Pine.
422 Blue Grass Burt, the Gold Star Detective.
390 The Giant Cupid; or, Cibuta John's Jubilee.

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- 716 Buffalo Bill's Scout Shadows; or, Emerald Ed of Devil's Acre. By Col. Prentiss Ingraham.
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